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TARGET SAIGON

Volume 1: The Pretence of Peace

1973-75

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Abbreviations

AA	Anti-aircraft
AAA	Anti-Aircraft Artillery
ACS	Armored Cavalry Squadron
AFB	Air Force Base
APC	Armored Personnel Carrier
ARVN	Army of the Republic of Vietnam, the South Vietnamese Army
ATGM	Anti-tank guided missile
Brig Gen	Brigadier General (military-commissioned officer rank)
Capt	Captain (military-commissioned officer rank)
CBU	Cluster bomb unit
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency (USA)
C-in-C	Chief-in-Command
CO	Commanding Officer
Col	Colonel (military-commissioned officer rank)
Col Gen	Colonel-General (top military-commissioned officer rank)
COSVN	Central Office for South Vietnam
DMZ	Demilitarized Zone, separating North from South Vietnam
FAC	Forward Air Controller, usually airborne controller in observation aircraft
FSB	Fire Support Base
Gen	General (military-commissioned officer rank)
GP	General-purpose (bomb)
HQ	Headquarters
KIA	Killed in Action
Km	Kilometer
Lt	Lieutenant (military-commissioned officer rank)
Lt Col	Lieutenant-Colonel (military-commissioned officer rank)
1st Lt	First Lieutenant (military-commissioned officer rank)
2nd Lt	Second Lieutenant (lowest military-commissioned officer rank)
Maj	Major (military-commissioned officer rank)
MANPADS	Man-portable air defense system(s) – light surface-to-air missile system that can be carried and deployed in combat by a single soldier
MBT	Main Battle Tank
MIA	Missing in action
MR	Military Region
NCO	Non-commissioned officer
PAVN	People's Army of Vietnam, the North Vietnamese Army
POW	Prisoner of War
PRG	Provisional Revolutionary Government (Viet Cong)
RF/PF	Regional Forces/People's Forces from the ARVN
SA-2 Guideline	ASCC codename for S-75 Dvina, Soviet SAM system
SA-7 Grail	ASCC codename for 9K32 Strela-2, Soviet MANPADS
SAM	Surface-to-air missile
SP	Self-propelled (artillery)
UHF	Ultra High Frequency
USMC	United States Marine Corps
USAF	United States Air Force
USN	United States Navy
VNAF	Vietnamese Air Force, Air Force of South Vietnam
VNMC	Vietnamese Marine Corps
WIA	Wounded in Action

CHAPTER 1
PEACE WITHOUT HONOR

After 27 years of conflict it seemed that in January 1973 peace would settle finally on the Indochina peninsula. The "peace with honor", as it was called by US President Richard Nixon, was signed in Paris on 27 January 1973 by the US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and the North Vietnamese representative Le Duc Tho. Both would later receive the Nobel Peace Prize. To achieve this objective, the North Vietnamese had paid a very high price. By launching a nationwide offensive on Easter day of 1972, they hoped to break the negotiations stalemate in the aftermath of the Tet Offensive of 1968 and further advance their own interests. Not all their war aims had been achieved with their Nguyen Hue Offensive, named after a Vietnamese emperor who had to fight another Chinese invasion. After wearing down the enemy with a long guerrilla campaign, he amassed his regular battle corps and brought them secretly through the jungle to inflict a decisive defeat on the invaders in front of Hanoi during the Tet holidays of 1789. The main aim of the offensive – the destruction of a perceived fragile Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) – failed. Despite numerous setbacks and retreats, the ARVN passed the test with a newfound confidence, stopping the North Vietnamese invasion at the gates of Hue and Saigon, inflicting heavy casualties on the enemy. The People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) had suffered some 100,000 casualties, but some US intelligence estimations put it as high as 180,000 by including those killed during the air offensive against North Vietnam, along with 600 tanks and armored vehicles destroyed. The South Vietnamese had lost some 44,000 men but US airpower had played a decisive role by providing close air support and launching interdiction missions on both the battlefields and the enemy's rear lines, in North Vietnam and against the Ho Chi Minh trails in Laos and Cambodia. At the ceasefire date, ARVN troops roughly controlled 75 percent of the territory and most of the cities, representing 85 percent of the population.

The North Vietnamese proposed in exchange of the release of US prisoners of war the withdrawal of the remaining "foreign forces", meaning only the US forces still present in Vietnam. Washington

At the approach of the ceasefire, the fighting increased as the North Vietnamese tried to expand their controlled areas during their "land-grab" campaign. These M48s of the ARVN 20th Tank Squadron of the I Armored Brigade move past the last lines held by the South Vietnamese north of Quang Tri City to tackle North Vietnamese probing attacks. (ARVN)

implicitly acknowledged the maintenance of the North Vietnamese troops in South Vietnam, accepting the Hanoi version that they were only genuine local Viet Cong troops. Facing growing domestic problems, President Nixon wanted only one thing: to bring back home US prisoners of war and the last troops. After nearly a decade of conflict, the US had achieved most of their initial war objectives, namely the preservation of an anti-communist regime in South Vietnam and the cessation of North Vietnamese aggression. Nixon was, however, confident that since relations had been restored with China in January 1972, America's main strategic aim pursued in Asia in the last decades – the "containment" of a perceived Chinese expansionism – had been fulfilled. He hoped that Peking could pressure Hanoi to restrain its war aims and accept a definitive two-Vietnam solution like in the Korean peninsula. However, some of his advisers were more pessimistic, knowing too well how the North Vietnamese were fiercely independent from their Chinese and Soviet mentors. Hanoi surely would not renounce its aim of reunifying the two areas of Vietnam. For Kissinger, it was important to have a "decent interval" of time as a face-saving measure for the US; cynically sacrificing South Vietnam was the price to pay within the wider context of the Cold War.

The text of the Paris Peace Accords was elaborated without consulting the South Vietnamese. None of their fundamental demands appeared: the removal of North Vietnamese troops, the reconnaissance of the 17th parallel as the international boundary, and the maintenance of a residual US force in the country as a guarantee. Under Nixon's threat of signing the agreement alone and the suspension of all economic and military aids, President Nguyen Van Thieu of South Vietnam was forced to accept. To appease Thieu, Nixon also sent him a series of letters engaging his personal responsibility that in case of "flagrant violations" of the peace agreement by communists, the US would again intervene.

However, for the first time, the communist did not ask for the removal of the current South Vietnamese government as a prerequisite to a ceasefire and a peace accord. The different South Vietnamese "parties", meaning the Saigon government and the Viet Cong, represented by the Provisional Revolutionary Government (PRG), would contend themselves to sort out their problems through local elections to be organized by a National Reconciliation and Concord Committee. However, as it required unanimity on any decisions, that formula could only lead to paralysis. In fact, peace seemed remote since the South Vietnamese felt they were forced to accept the Washington diktat. President Thieu clearly indicated that he wanted no compromises with the communists. His policy could be summed up in four points: no negotiation with the enemy, no recognition of a communist party in South Vietnam, no coalition government, and no territories abandoned to communists. Clearly, Saigon did not want to

The ARVN attempt to reach the DMZ in the Cua Viet River estuary area before the ceasefire proved a costly failure. The armored task forces advancing along the beaches bordering the coastal Route 1 were pushed back by determined enemy counterattacks. These North Vietnamese soldiers pose atop some knocked-out M41A3s of the I Armored Brigade. (PAVN)

What remained of the little fishing port of Sa Huynh, occupied by elements of the PAVN 2nd Division on the onset of the ceasefire. The South Vietnamese reoccupied the place after heavy fighting on 16 February 1973. (US Army)

A South Vietnamese Ranger is readied to resume the advance to recapture the district town of Que Son, southwest of Da Nang, occupied by the North Vietnamese just before the ceasefire. In the vicious street fighting, hand grenades were a weapon of choice. (ARVN)

be bound by the Paris Peace Accords and viewed them as what they are: a provisional ceasefire imposed on the North Vietnamese after the failure of their Nguyen Hue Offensive and an exchange of prisoners, as well as the departure of the last US combat troops. If Washington continued to provide economic and military aid, the South Vietnamese felt that they were within their rights to reassert control over as much territory as possible captured by the communists. On their side, the communists continued their dual strategy – diplomatic and military – and did not see themselves bound by the Paris Peace Accords. On the political front, they portrayed themselves as strictly enforcing the terms of the agreements but they tried by any means possible to expand their

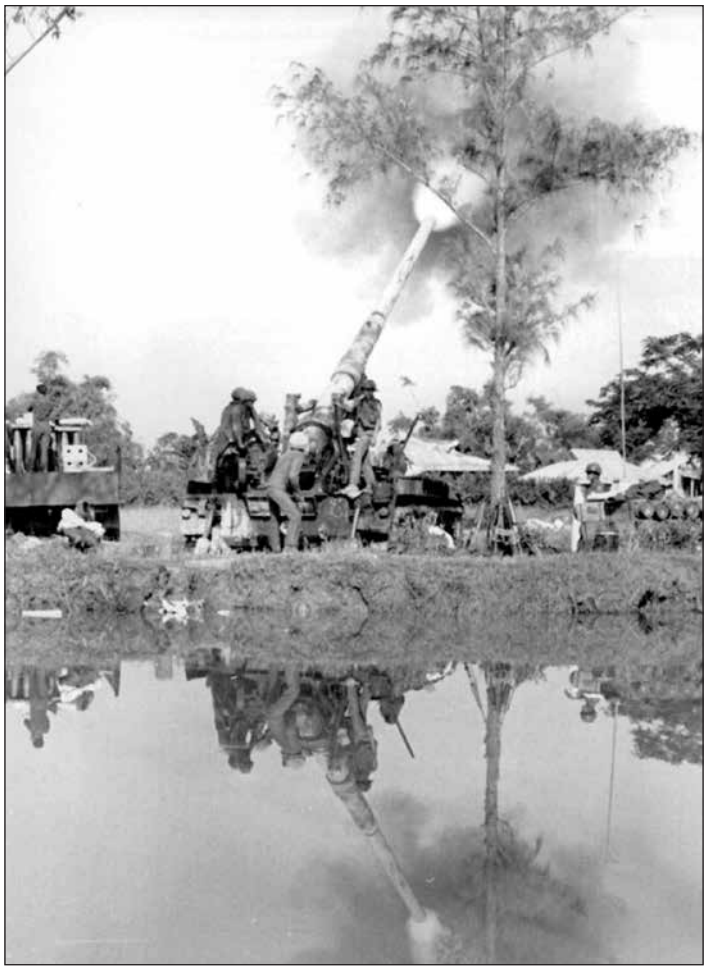
The siege of the An Loc had been lifted in June 1972 but renewed North Vietnamese attacks again interdicted Route 13 that linked the city to Saigon. In fact, An Loc was practically isolated until the end of the war. The town and its Ranger defenders were resupplied only by air. These wounded Rangers are directed toward a helicopter pick-up point. (US Army)

The ARVN attempts to clear out the North Vietnamese roadblocks set up on Route 13 led to numerous clashes before the ceasefire. These South Vietnamese artillery observers direct fire against an enemy-held village bordering the highway in January 1973. (US Army)

controlled "liberated areas". These zones would serve as jumping-off points for the final onslaught when circumstances allowed. In fact, the Paris Peace Accords were celebrated by the whole Politburo in Hanoi as a new victorious step toward the ultimate purpose of liberating Saigon now that the main obstacle to this objective, the final departure of US forces, had been achieved.

Against this background, neither side within the National Reconciliation and Concord Committee could agree on who would represent the neutralist "Third Force", which would also attend the working committee of that organization. That Third Force, with discreet backing from part of the US political left, as well as some foreign countries such as France and Sweden, consisted mainly of the circle around retired ARVN General Duong Van Minh (Big Minh), various unaffiliated intellectuals, several minor non-communist opposition parties, and the An Quang Buddhist faction. Due to the deadlock, President Thieu surprised everyone by proposing to go ahead for elections under international control. He was convinced that the majority of the South Vietnamese – those living in the countryside and who benefitted from his land-reform program (nationalizing land of the grand landowners to redistribute to the landless peasants) – would vote for him. Giving credence to his hypothesis, the communists blocked his election proposal several times by continuing to portray him as a dictator. It was an opinion shared by most of the US Congress and part of the Washington bureaucracy, as well as the US public at large. It was true that he had run a rather farcical election in 1971 for a second term as president, after coming into power with a group of officers following a coup. However, the communist prediction that his regime would collapse in the weeks following America's complete pullout did not happen.

President Thieu instead reasserted South Vietnam resilience. On 20 May 1973, he announced an "Eight-year reconstruction and development plan", to resettle the one million refugees from the fighting in 1972, increase rice production, and finance new development projects. His program dangled some of the most liberal incentives in the world to foreign investors. He sought out new sources of aid,



A South Vietnamese 175mm gun fires against North Vietnamese positions along Route 13. The M107 gun was the only one in service with the ARVN that could outrange the enemy M-46 130mm guns. (ARVN)

The North Vietnamese suffered huge losses during their nationwide 1972 offensive, committing there for the first time their entire armored force, which was virtually destroyed during the fighting. This T-54B was destroyed during an assault against the besieged town of An Loc. (US Army)

The tankers of the ARVN I Armored Brigade rejoice after hearing on the radio the implementation of the ceasefire on 27 January 1973. (US Army)

These North Vietnamese gunners of an anti-aircraft battery learn the conditions of the implementation of the ceasefire by reading a newspaper. (PAVN)

The last American to be killed in Vietnam before the implementation of the ceasefire was Lieutenant Colonel William S. Nolde, ARVN senior adviser in Binh Long Province. He was caught under North Vietnamese artillery fire near An Loc on 27 January 1973. He poses here a few days earlier in front of a destroyed PAVN T-54 tank. (US Army)

primarily from France, Japan, and West Germany. Even communist China, to the chagrin of Hanoi, was interested by joint economic developments. Nevertheless, it was always the US that he hoped would be his primary ally in the coming difficult recovery years. He landed in Los Angeles on 1 April to meet Nixon to get reassurances for the continuing US support for his country. Presenting his eight-year plan, Thieu wanted more than $1.5 billion in economic aid a year for the next three years, with reduced amounts in succeeding years. He expected that US support would alleviate the current problems, and then initiated a "takeoff": a rapid expansion of the South Vietnamese economy, modeled after South Korea following the Korean War. If the Nixon administration appeared supportive, he noted that the current economic downturn of the same US would rather limit its aid. In addition, he faced an overtly hostile Congress. Thieu returned to

The South Vietnamese aggressively reacted to the communist "land-grab" campaign, counterattacking and recapturing lost ground even after the ceasefire date. These ARVN soldiers capture a PAVN soldier during one of these clearing operations in the III Corps sector at the end of January 1973. (ARVN)

These captured T-54 tanks were exposed as war booty at Hue to be seen by the South Vietnamese inhabitants. The city was on the verge of being overrun in May 1972 but the North Vietnamese were stopped at its northern gate. (ARVN)

This PAVN Type 63 tank is captured by the South Vietnamese Marines in Quang Tri. (US Army)

This PAVN BTR-50PK is exposed in front of the main entry gate of the Hue imperial palace. (ARVN)

The ARVN had derailed the communist Nguyen Hue Campaign of 1972 at a high price, losing some 44,000 troops and a huge quantity of equipment. This M41A3 tank of the I Armored Brigade is destroyed in the vicious street fighting to reoccupy Quang Tri. (US Army)

Saigon rather empty handed. In fact, the economic situation in South Vietnam would quickly worsen as the country's piaster currency, linked to the US dollar, slumped when the latter was devalued. This was in addition to worldwide inflation soaring due to the Arab oil embargo in the wake of the Yom Kippur War. South Vietnam could no longer afford to import goods necessary for its infrastructure projects at such high prices, particularly the oil that it needed to sustain such a large armed force and to continue the war effort.

Meanwhile, the US had 60 days to withdraw its last troops from South Vietnam, including all the advisors attached to the South Vietnamese units. The US also had to disband its military general headquarters in South Vietnam: the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV). It was replaced by the Defense Attaché Office (DAO), which was allowed only 50 military personnel and 1,200 civilians to manage military aid to South Vietnam. However, the DAO was not authorized to continue to offer advice to the ARVN. Some 5,237 US civilian contractors were nevertheless recruited to help the South Vietnamese in maintenance; most of them in fact worked for the Vietnamese Air Force (VNAF). Only the CIA continued to maintain a sizable presence, notably by keeping in place some 41 aircraft of its "airline", Air America. The last US soldiers left South Vietnam on 29 March 1973. They were preceded by the last South Korean troops on 17 March.

The South Vietnamese also lost many armored vehicles during the 1972 fighting. These North Vietnamese troops examine a collection of the main vehicles then in service with the ARVN, including an M48A3, two M41A3 tanks and several M113 APCs. (PAVN)

Meanwhile, the treaty called for a four-party joint military commission to be constituted by the four signatories – the US, North Vietnam, South Vietnam, and the Viet Cong – to implement and monitor compliance with the provisions on withdrawal, ceasefire, dismantling of bases, return of war prisoners, and exchange of information on those missing in action. The most important task for the commission, however, was the delimitation of areas of control, indicating who was in control of which territories. The discussions ended inconclusively and as fighting resumed and escalated, the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong delegations were confined to Camp Davis, near Saigon's international airport. However, the South Vietnamese never closed the facility and arrested the communist officials, keeping them in semi-custody, so preserving a communication channel with the other side until the final capitulation of South Vietnam.

An International Commission of Control and Supervision (ICCS), consisting of Canada, Hungary, Indonesia, and Poland, also oversaw the agreement. The teams of international observers had to be deployed in the field to report any violation of the ceasefire as well as to control the entry of any new military equipment. The ICCS had divided the country into seven regions. In each were a variety of team sites. Basically, these sites were of two kinds: Observer Team Site and Point of Entry Team Site.

Members of the four-party joint military commission, constituted by the representatives of the United States, North Vietnam, South Vietnam, and the Viet Cong to implement and monitor compliance with the provisions of the Paris Peace Accords, meet in Saigon in a neutral compound, Camp Davis, near the Tan Son Nhut International Airport. (USAF)

CHAPTER 2
A CEASEFIRE THAT NEVER COMES

With the prospect of a ceasefire looming, the North Vietnamese suddenly increased their attacks throughout South Vietnam in a "land-grab" campaign, despite many of their units being exhausted after the tough fighting since the beginning of the "Easter Offensive". The purpose was to claim as much as territory and population as possible to be placed under the control of the PRG.

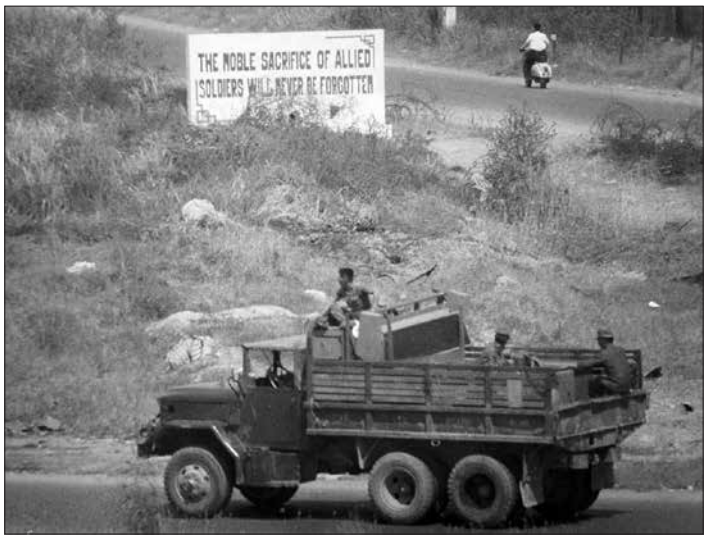
The surge on their operations began in the second half of January 1973. In the ARVN I Corps area, the forces arrayed against the South Vietnamese forces deployed outside the reconquered city of Quang Tri could only adopt a defensive posture. Elements of the 324B Division attacked around Hue, even cutting temporarily the strategic Route 1 that ran along the coast, from the North Vietnamese border to Saigon. But all the lost grounds were retaken by the ARVN 1st Division and Territorial troops by 3 February. The communists tried to occupy the lowland areas south of the Hai Van Pass, but the PAVN did no better around Da Nang, even though rocket fire hit the city for several days. It was the area south of that city that suffered the heaviest assaults. In Quang Tin Province, the planned PAVN attack was forestalled by an operation launched by the ARVN 3rd Division against the PAVN 711th Division defending the Hiep Duc logistics base. However, the South Vietnamese could not advance much in the face of stiff resistance anchored on a series of fortified hills, including former Fire Support Bases (FSB) West and O'Connor. Further south, in Quang Ngai Province, the PAVN 2nd Division launched the most significant attacks. On 27 January, its 141st Regiment made a breakthrough to the sea and captured the small port of Sa Huynh, again interdicting Route 1. The ARVN I Corps counterattacked vigorously, even though the ceasefire would be announced the next day. The fighting continued until 16 February when the South Vietnamese retook the place, discovering more than 600 dead enemy soldiers.

It was in the ARVN II Corps area that the North Vietnamese targeted the lowlands of the Binh Dinh Province, a long-established communist guerrilla stronghold since the French Indochina War. The mountain redoubts overlooking it were controlled by the PAVN 3rd Division, which launched a series of attacks against the positions of the ARVN 22nd Division. Here, also, the North Vietnamese occupied a string of hamlets and temporarily cut Route 1. But the local Viet Cong units were too weak to capitalize on these gains and by 5 February the ARVN had retaken all the lost positions. On the Central Highlands, northern sector, the PAVN 10th and 320th divisions probed the ARVN positions around Kontum and Pleiku, temporarily cutting Route 14 between these two cities at the Chu Pao Pass. But the South Vietnamese repulsed the enemy here too.

In the ARVN III Corps strategic area, encompassing Saigon, the PAVN also tried to expand its controlled areas, particularly in the northern sector of the capital. But good intelligence led the South Vietnamese to pre-empt the enemy move along the Saigon River corridor, inflicting heavy losses to the PAVN 7th Division. Another communist attack against Tay Ninh also failed thanks to a determined resistance by the local regional forces. The purpose was to move in there to install the PRG seat, posing as a de facto rival capital close to Saigon. Other guerrilla attacks throughout the area saw 144 hamlets occupied by the communists on 27 January, but all were retaken a week later.

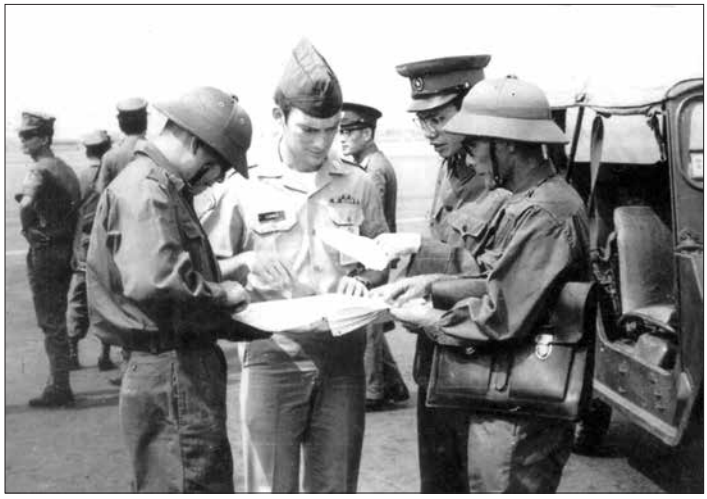
Finally, in the ARVN IV Corps area, ARVN intelligence led to the launch of Operation Dong Khoi, a Mekong Delta-wide sweep to pre-empt the enemy move on 15 January. The communists lost more than 2,000 men, weakening their own offensive that started on 23 January. The PAVN tried to clear the Cambodian border close to the Kien Phong Province but again achieved nothing. Throughout the Delta, the PAVN infiltrated elements of their 1st, 5th and 6th divisions, posing as Viet Cong guerrillas, beginning on 26 January. Several outposts and district capitals were attacked and some 125 hamlets came under attack, but no more than 20 were controlled by the communists at any one time. After suffering heavy losses, PAVN units withdrew across Cambodia. By early February 1973, the North Vietnamese had lost more than 5,000 troops for little gains. The relative strength of each side changed little as well. Observers of the

A North Vietnamese officer of the four-party joint military commission checks the departure of the last US troops from Vietnam at Saigon International Airport in March 1973. (USAF)



This sign beside a road at the entry to Saigon reminds the South Vietnamese that they were now to stand alone against the still-present communist threat. For the first time in its history, the ARVN would not benefit from a foreign advisory mission to coordinate its operations. (Timothy Pham collection)

An overjoyed group of US prisoners on board a USAF C-141 airlifter after their release at the Gia Lam – Hanoi airport in March 1973 during Operation Homecoming. (USAF)



US and North Vietnamese officers of the four-party joint military commission engage in heated discussion on delineating areas controlled by both sides. This futile exercise ended when fighting soon resumed throughout South Vietnam. (USAF)

ICCS soon discovered this but could only point out the meaningless of their task as their reports had no constraining powers. In fact, their mission proved useless as the fighting continued. Furthermore, the North Vietnamese forbade any military inspection control in their "liberated areas". On 7 April 1973, an ICCS helicopter was shot down by a SAM-7 MANPAD missile while en route over a communist-controlled zone. The other accompanying helicopter was damaged and made a forced landing. After a series of other incidents, Canada left and withdraw its team of observers. It was replaced by another provided by Iran. The ICCS continued to operate but only on South Vietnamese-controlled territory, checking replacement military equipment delivered by the US on predetermined entry points based on one for one item lost as had been specified by the Paris Peace Accords. No additional equipment or "new weapon systems" were allowed. The situation angered the South Vietnamese, who pointed out that no such control was ever exercised on the communist side. They also accused Polish and Hungarian observers of blatant spying when they toured their military bases, indicating that ARVN intelligence had strong suspicions that the collected data was transmitted to the North Vietnamese.

Low-level fighting continued until June 1973 while each side tried to agree terms at the Paris Peace Accords. Even if Viet Cong strength was at its lowest ebb – about 25,000 men – guerrilla attacks continued

One of the three prisoner-exchange stations was on the banks of the Thac Hanh River, south of Dong Ha. These North Vietnamese prisoners are stripped of their ARVN-supplied uniforms before boarding boats to cross back into North Vietnamese occupied areas. (ARVN)

in numerous areas under South Vietnamese control. Many Viet Cong units had disbanded and their cadres infiltrated behind ARVN lines, trying to set up new "resistance cells". They accompanied propaganda teams who penetrated contested villages and issued identity cards, by claiming to ICCS observers that they were part of the PRG-controlled areas. The PAVN also relocated "volunteers" of the North Vietnamese Assault Youth Organization as settlers in the regions controlled by them, claiming that they were South Vietnamese civilians siding with the Viet Cong. However, the Viet Cong efforts failed and their guerrillas would never again become a significant military force.

Homecoming and clearing the mines

It was under these tense circumstances that prisoner exchanges took place. On 13 February 1973, the first USAF transport aircraft landed at Gia Lam Airport in Hanoi to bring back the first released US prisoners. Until 4 April, Operation Homecoming evacuated 464 captured Americans in 54 C-141 sorties. Some 128 others were released at Loc Ninh, north of Saigon. This last location was also used, with another one across the Tach Hanh River, north of Hue, to exchange some 31,567 Viet Cong and North Vietnamese against 6,063 South Vietnamese. Some 1,350 Americans missing in action were unaccounted for. Their unknown fate poisoned relations between the US and communist Vietnam for the next 30 years. Meanwhile, US National Security Adviser Henri Kissinger visited North Vietnam on 10 February, meeting with North Vietnamese Prime Minister Pham Van Dong. The two men discussed diplomatic relations between the two countries and a substantial US $3.25 billion aid and reconstruction package. None of these promises were fulfilled.

One of the protocols of the Paris Peace Accords required the US to eliminate the mines seeded on the North Vietnamese waters carried out during Operation Pocket Money. It was also a bargaining tool to convince the North Vietnamese to release prisoners of war. The reopening of Haiphong harbor was vital for rebuilding the North Vietnamese economy after the last US bombing campaign. For nearly

A group of North Vietnamese soldiers and female Viet Cong guerrillas raise the National Liberation Front flag in a contested village in the ARVN III Corps area, claiming it to be part of the territory under the control of the Revolutionary Provisional Government. (PAVN)

A team of Canadian observers of the ICCS move along Route 13 to check the ceasefire status in February 1973. They are in discussion with ARVN tankers of the 23rd Tank Squadron of the III Armored Brigade. (US Army)

six months, the US Navy carried out the daunting task of removing most of the 30,000 air-seeded mines along the North Vietnamese coast and in some of its inner waterways. Operation End Sweeps started on 6 February 1973 and proceeded in an anti-climatic atmosphere of minimal cooperation with the North Vietnamese. While USAF units based in Thailand continued to attack communist targets in Cambodia until August 1973, and their South Vietnamese allies continued to fight them in the south, the US sailors managed to forge a minimal, tense working relationship with Hanoi's representatives.

Accordingly, the US Navy's Mine Warfare Force (MINEWARFOR) planned the operations and focused on the mines that could be cleared by magnetic sweeps. Many of them in fact were programmed either to self-destruct or be rendered inert after a specific period, usually 180 days. The US Navy also knew generally where the mines had been laid, although the inherent inaccuracy of aerial minelaying meant that the precise location of each mine was not known. Rear Admiral Brian McCauley was in charge of Task Force 78 (TF-78), the mine-countermeasure force of the Pacific 7th Fleet. Ten ocean mine sweepers (MSO) were assigned to TF-78 for the task but they were mainly intended to clear out mines off the coast of Haiphong. McCauley went to Haiphong on 5 February to arrange with his North Vietnamese opposite, Colonel Hoang Huu Thai, the last technical details. Six MSOs completed a total of 439 hours of sweeping, with four other MSOs present at various times but not sweeping. For the waterways and harbor-access channels, it was determined that the sweeps should

These ARVN soldiers move into a contested area to reclaim it under South Vietnamese control, with the aim of taking down the Viet Cong flag fixed nearby. (ARVN)

be done by specially equipped helicopters. Consequently, the MSOs were joined on 27 February by five amphibious ships, including the assault ships USS *Tripoli* (LPH-10), USS *New Orleans* (LPH-11), USS *Inchon* (LPH-12), and the amphibious transport docks USS *Dubuque* (LPD-8), USS *Ogden* (LPD-5), and USS *Cleveland* (LPD-7) carrying 31 US Navy and USMC CH-53 helicopters of the HM-12, HMM-165, and HMH-463.

The helicopters practiced for the operation off Charleston, South Carolina, where it was discovered that the marine pilots' inexperience in towing the heavy Mark 105 hydrofoil mine sweeping sleds posed a risk. The US Navy devised a buoyant, magnetized pipe filled with Styrofoam that could be towed easily. Only the most experienced crews operated the Mark 105 device. In addition, the tank landing ship

The ICCS teams could only hopelessly report the escalating fighting without having the power to stop them. Angry South Vietnamese demonstrators manifest in front of their headquarters in Saigon. Disillusioned, Canada soon withdrew from the organization. (Albert Grandolini collection)

A CH-53D Sea Stallion of the USMC HMH-463 squadron is seen with mine-clearing gear in tow near Hon Gay harbor, North Vietnam, during Operation End Sweep. (US Navy)

US Navy Rear Admiral Brian McCauley, commander of Task Force 78, second from left, finalizes the details of the last mine-clearing operations with North Vietnamese representative Colonel Hoang Huu Thai, second from right, on board USS New Orleans (LPH-11) in June 1973. The ship was on station with its CH-53D Sea Stallion helicopters near Haiphong harbor. (US Navy)

President Nguyen Van Thieu of South Vietnam visited the US in April 1973 to seek help for his eight-year reconstruction and development plan but faced a hostile Congress. He is seen here with his wife at a reception given by President Richard Nixon at San Clemente, California. The US President tried to reassure him by promising that if there was flagrant violation of the ceasefire by the communists, he would send back the B-52 bombers. (Albert Grandolini collection)

With the failure of the Nguyen Hue campaign of 1972, Senior General Vo Nguyen Giap was forced to resign from his post as PAVN commander in chief. However, as chairman of the Central Military Commission and defense minister, he still held considerable power and continued to shape the military policy of North Vietnam. He is seen here, second from right, visiting the front lines around the Cua Viet River near the DMZ in February 1973 with the commander of the 320B Division, Major General Nguyen Sung Lam, second from left. (PAVN)

USS *Washtenaw County* (LST-1166) was modified to serve as a 'special device mine sweeper' or MSS-2. As such, she was intended to be used to check that passage was indeed safe through waters that presumably were clear of active mines. She was pumped full of polyurethane foam so she would not sink if she struck a mine.

The helicopters were intended to enter action on 28 February but President Nixon ordered a suspension in response to North Vietnamese delays in releasing prisoners of war. The Stallions finally went in for their first mission inside the channel leading to Haiphong harbor the next day. The helicopters then moved to operate in the ports of Hon Gai and Cam Pha, as well as the coastal waters off Vinh. Elsewhere in North Vietnam, US Navy technical personnel prepared 50 North Vietnamese sailors in a unique training program to conduct their own minesweeping operations: the minesweeping gears had been delivered by USAF C-130s that landed at the Cat Bi airbase outside Haiphong. But the mine sweepings were again suspended on 17 April because the US accused North Vietnam of not fulfilling the Peace Agreement. On 13 June 1973, Washington and Hanoi agreed to resume the sweepings. The last helicopter sweeping sortie took place on 5 July 1973 and the TF-78 withdrew from North Vietnamese waters on 27 July.

Meanwhile, the North Vietnamese made unprecedented preparations for reshuffling their main force thanks to massive Soviet and Chinese aid to replace all the losses suffered in 1972. As soon as the rail links were restored with China, trainloads of equipment crossed the border. Soviet weaponry arrived by sea when the main ports were cleared of mines.

CHAPTER 3
THE SOUTH VIETNAMESE ARMED FORCES

The Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces (RVNAF), and particularly the ARVN at the ceasefire date, had been established among other organizations and structures developed four years earlier. In May 1968 the MACV submitted a plan to the Commander in Chief, Pacific (CINCPAC) for the consolidated RVNAF improvement and modernization program (CRIMP). The CRIMP was intended to provide an improved balance in the combat forces and increase the firepower, mobility, and logistics of the RVNAF. It came to be the basis for later structural changes within the force and the so-called Vietnamization policy. Subsequently approved by the US secretary of defense, the CRIMP called for just over a million men in the armed forces in fiscal year 1971, for about 1,090,000 in fiscal year 1972, and for 1,100,000 in fiscal year 1973. In February 1972 the MACV arrested the final outlines of the South Vietnamese forces and composition for the coming years. That order of battle did not change much until the capitulation of South Vietnam. The 1972 Easter Offensive saw the RVNAF pass the test with difficulty: after a period of faltering under the North Vietnamese onslaught, they recovered and counter-attacked. However, the fact that the conflict had changed in nature,

The prospect of a ceasefire prompted the US to accelerate the deliveries of equipment to the ARVN with the ENHANCE project. An M48A3 tank unloads from a ship at Saigon's port in January 1973. The South Vietnamese tried unsuccessfully to make the Patton the only tank in its inventory, replacing the lighter M-41s. (US Navy)

Although most equipment was delivered by sea, urgent requirements were transported by air, such as this M41A3 tank from a USAF C-5A Galaxy transport at Tan Son Nhut airbase. The Walker Bulldog was the ARVN standard tank even if was now outgunned by the North Vietnamese T-54s. (USAF)

The ARVN continued with a dwindling number of obsolete M24 Chaffee light tanks for security missions, escorting convoys or protecting military bases or important bridges. (US Army)

from a guerrilla one into a conventional war, did not seem to be fully considered. The ARVN continued to maintain a dual two-force structure: a conventional battle corps representing roughly 40% of the total of the armed forces, and a huge territorial force for the pacification operations against a dwindling Viet Cong guerrilla threat. The South Vietnamese Joint General Staff (JGS), placed under the command of Lieutenant General Cao Van Vien, tried to reform that organization, with attempts to increase the number of regular divisions or those of the strategic reserve, but very few changes came out of these proposals. In fact, the South Vietnamese could not really change an organization drafted previously by the Americans, and as such already funded along that plan. Furthermore, it was impaired by the very internal RVNAF politics that made any substantial organizational changes have a profound impact on the South Vietnamese political system itself.

Constitutionally, the supreme commander of the South Vietnamese armed forces was the president of the republic. He was advised by the defense minister, the National Security Council, and the Central Pacification and Development Council that advised him on military and strategic issues. The JGS was in theory the body charged with implementing the war strategy and conducting military operations. The nature of South Vietnamese politics meant that it was President Thieu alone who held such prerogatives. Being the strongman of South Vietnam for nearly a decade, Thieu had restored a certain level of stability to a very volatile political scene. Because every military action had domestic political implications, all decisions were taken by the president within a restrictive circle of appointees and followers, notably the very influential assistant for security, Lieutenant General Dang Van Quang. That fragmented system of command was the result of the extensive implication of the military in the political life

The M48A3 Patton was the only tank able to cope with the PAVN T-54. Even if their crews were generally better trained than their North Vietnamese opponents, with fewer than 200 in service they could not deal with the enemy's numerical superiority. (ARVN)

of South Vietnam. Down to provincial chief level, every post was held by ARVN officers personally appointed by Thieu, who always tried to avert a new coup against him. He dealt directly with the four military region-corps commanders who also exercised their authority over the province chiefs. Each corps commander had wide prerogatives within his military region and acted autonomously as local theater commander. Little coordination existed at national level.

The JGS, then, had only an advisory role and managed budget and manpower. General Vien rarely, if ever, interfered with corps

With the ENHANCE project, the ARVN set up three additional air defense artillery battalions. These mixed units were equipped with M55 Quad .50 Cal machine-guns mounted on trucks, Bofor 40mm towed guns, M163 20mm Vulcan, and M42 40mm SP anti-aircraft tanks. These vehicles were in fact used mainly in a direct fire support role for the infantry. (ARVN)

The ARVN infantry was well supported by the ubiquitous M113 APCs. These vehicles have just disembarked at Saigon's harbor and have not yet received their .50 Cal machine-gun turret and side firing .30 Cal light machine-guns. (US Army)

commanders' operational plans and decisions, except when general reserve units were involved. Another inadequacy was the lack of leaders at nationwide level competent in military matters who could

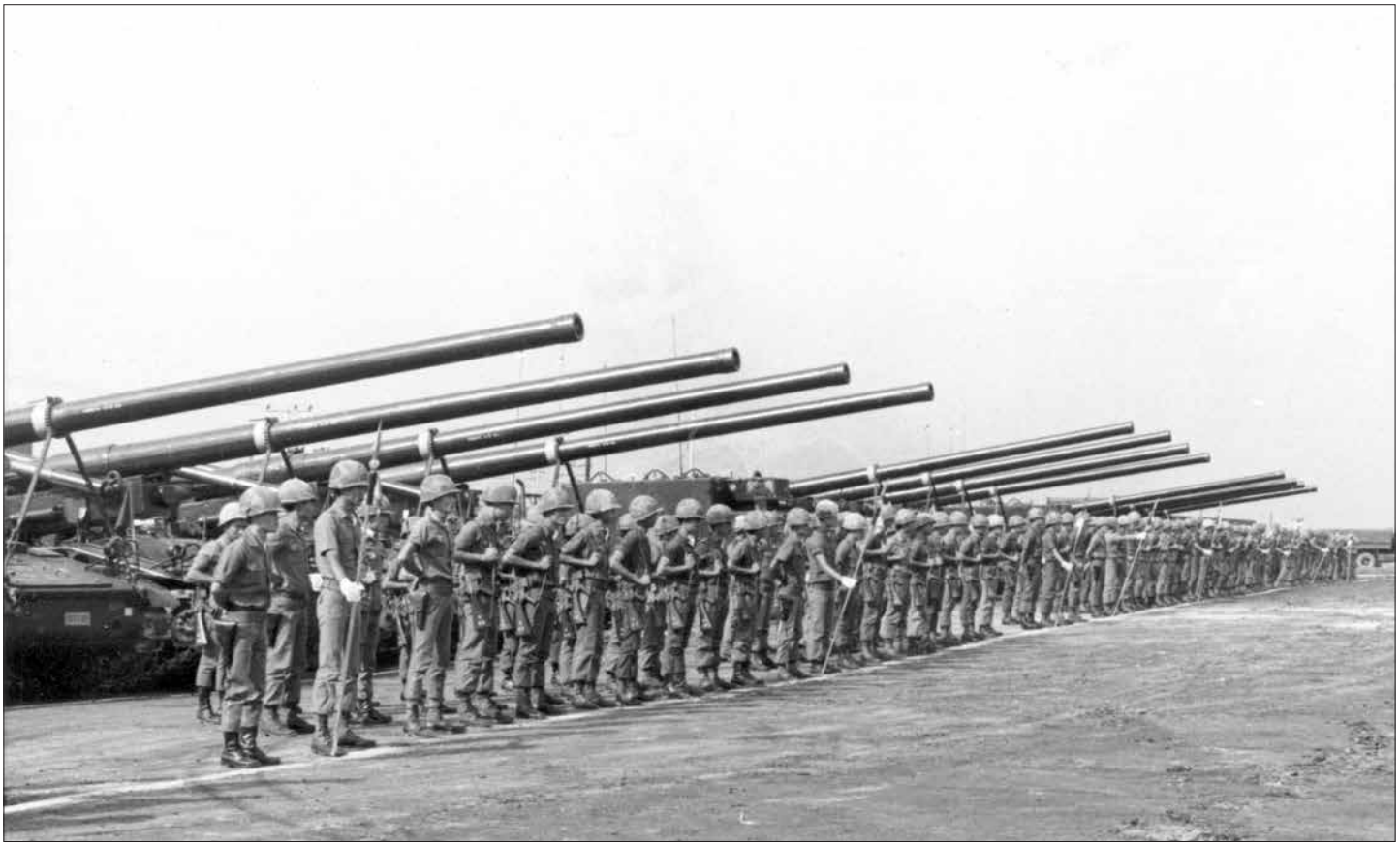
There were several variants of the M113 in service with the ARVN, including the M132 flamethrower vehicle. The M10-8 flame gun could reach a target at a maximum distance of 200 meters and the 200-gallon fuel capacity contained in the hull allowed it to fire for up to 32 seconds. (US Army)

The South Vietnamese Marine Division had an integral tracked amphibious tractor battalion equipped with LVTP-5 vehicles delivered in October 1972. (ARVN)

The standard ARVN armored recovery vehicle was the M578, which could retrieve most of the other armors then in service, except for M48 tanks. A small number of heavy M88 recovery vehicles were received in 1973 to cope with that situation. (ARVN)

express a strategic view. This system was on the brink of collapse during the Easter Offensive of 1972 but President Thieu reacted by appointing, under duress, professional and competent commanders instead of political officers. But this new generation of professional commanders still lacked confidence with the departure of their US

The ARVN standard armored reconnaissance car was the Cadillac Gage V100 Commando. They served not only in the cavalry squadrons but also with the mechanized platoons of the RF. (US Army)



The most potent and the only self-propelled gun in service with the ARVN was the M107 175mm. It was the only gun that could outrange the North Vietnamese M-46 130mm. But only 60 were in service with five artillery battalions: three attached to the I Corps, and one each with the II and III Corps. (ARVN)

The ARVN deployed 15 battalions of M114 155mm howitzers. Although heavy, they could not be displaced by the CH-47 helicopter; they were well appreciated for their firepower. (US Army)

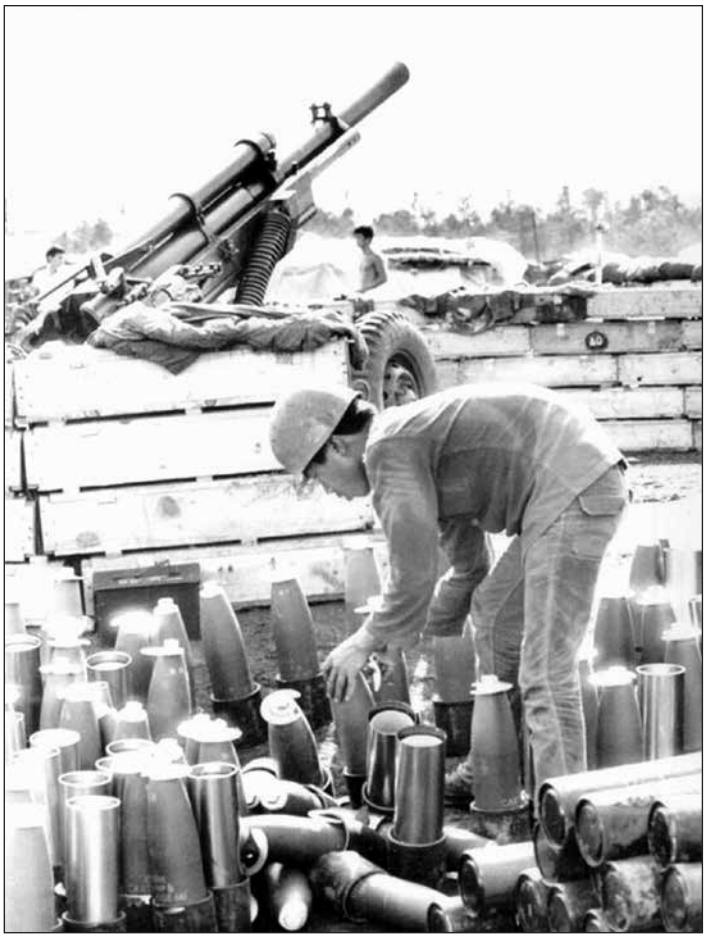
The ARVN RF also used a dwindling numbers of obsolete Canadian-built General Motors C15TA armored carriers for convoy escort duty alongside armored and armed trucks. (US Army)

The ARVN standard artillery piece was the M101 105mm howitzer. They were used not only in regular artillery battalions but also with more than 200 two-gun platoons of the territorial force, spread over the numerous local outposts for pacification operations. (US Army)

adviser, particularly in complex combined-arms operations. Inter-services rivalry and suspicions of coups only exacerbated that state when the VNAF and VNN units were placed directly under the command of each corps commander. They had been developed into modern tools but the ARVN commanders unfortunately did not know how to fully exploit them.

In January 1973, the South Vietnamese armed forces were expanded into a force of 1,100,000 men out of a population of 19 million. The expanding territorial forces had released the regular divisions from their static garrison duties for operation against the PAVN large formations. The Regional Forces (RF) amounted to 325,000 men organized into battalions, supported by two 105mm howitzers batteries. The Popular Force (PF) had some 200,000 men organized at district and village levels into platoons, often armed with obsolete weapons and nearly no support weapons. Facing the new communist conventional warfare strategy, the territorial forces did not have the required firepower, mobility, and training. Essentially a static force used in the pacification campaign, territorial troops lived with their families and tended to be involved in local politics.

The regular ARVN forces had an assigned strength of about 450,000 men. Of these, about 152,000 were in the infantry divisions and another 10,000 in ranger groups. A small number were assigned to the separate non-divisional artillery, cavalry, and tank units. The remainder were to be found in training, logistical, and other service and administrative support organizations and in hospitals. South Vietnam was divided into four Military Regions (MR), with one army



The ARVN had received a small number of the more modern M102 105mm howitzers. Most of them were deployed by the Airborne Division. (US Army)

A small number of XM-202 FLASH was issued to the ARVN. This four-tube launcher fired 66mm incendiary rockets. (ARVN)

South Vietnam was the first foreign user of the TOW ATGM when several launchers were rushed there in May 1972 to stop the North Vietnamese tanks' onslaught against Hue. Some 100 TOW launchers were deployed from 1973 onward, equipping 26 infantry regiments, four airborne and four marine brigades, and seven ranger groups. (US Army)

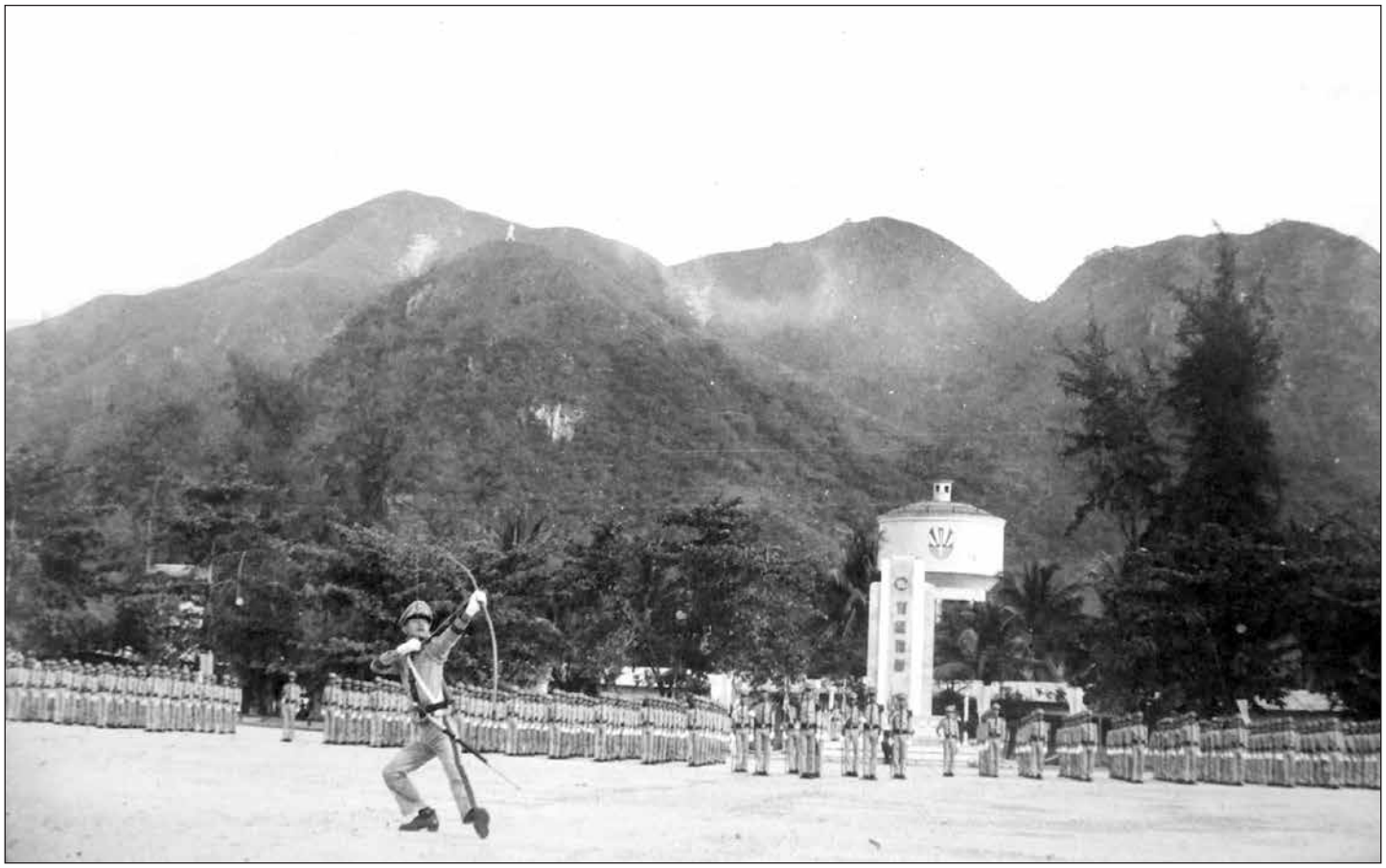
corps assigned to each. Each corps had in theory the capability to be used in nationwide deployment, but it tended to be restricted to their respective MR boundaries by lack of sufficient logistics and mobility. The corps commander was also de facto the MR commander. The 11 ARVN infantry divisions were then evenly distributed within the four corps, which also had an armored brigade each as well as regiment-sized ranger groups, artillery battalions' corps (M114 155mm howitzers and M107 175mm SP guns), and support units.

The prospect of a ceasefire prompted the US to launch the projects ENHANCE and ENHANCE PLUS to accelerate the delivery of equipment to compensate for the heavy material losses suffered during the 1972 fighting before the Paris Peace Accords conditions might curtail the deliveries. ENHANCE was undertaken to accelerate programs already planned under CRIMP. It provided new units and equipment for the army, air force, and navy.

- ENHANCE PLUS was a program to augment and modernize the VNAF. The following lists summarize the major items of equipment delivered:
- ARVN: Three artillery battalions of M107 175mm SP guns; two M48 tank squadrons; two air defense artillery battalions, with quad 50-caliber mounted on trucks and M42 twin 40mm SP guns; and 100 TOW (tube launched, optically tracked, wire guided) ATGMs, to be provided to 26 infantry regiments, three airborne brigades, three marine brigades, and seven ranger groups.
- VNAF: 32 UH-1 helicopters; five F-5A fighters; two A-37 squadrons; 12 RC-47 photo-reconnaissance airplanes; one AC-119K squadron; one C-7 squadron; one RC-119G squadron (maritime patrol); and two C-130 squadrons.
- Navy: Three high-endurance cutters (WHEC), referenced as frigates by the South Vietnamese.

By January 1973 the structure for the ARVN was as follows: 11 infantry divisions (35 regiments, 105 battalions); one airborne division (three regiments, nine battalions); seven ranger groups (21 battalions); 33 border defense ranger battalions; 18 armored cavalry squadrons (seven non-divisional); three M48 tank squadrons (one deployed, two in training); one LVPT-5 amphibious tractor battalion; forty-one 105mm artillery battalions (36 divisional, five non-divisional); fifteen 155mm artillery battalions (11 divisional, four non-divisional); two-hundred-and-four 105mm artillery platoons (two howitzers each); four air defense artillery battalions (one deployed, one in training, and two to be activated); and 17 miscellaneous battalions (military police, engineers, reconnaissance, etc.).

The ARVN armored forces were organized into 18 Armored Cavalry Squadrons (ACS) and four armored brigades. Three tank squadrons had been set up in 1972, each with 54 M-48 medium tanks. One ACS was assigned to each infantry division; the balance was affected to the armored brigades . From 1970 on, there were four armored brigades, one per corps. Designed to control up to six maneuver battalions or squadrons, the brigades had no organic units but were 'task organized' by their corps commanders according to the mission at hand, sometimes with many as 18 battalions! However, each



A cadet fires his bow at the traditional opening graduation ceremony at the National Military Academy of Dalat in 1973. Despite great efforts, the ARVN was still plagued by not having enough officers for its expanding forces, a problem aggravated by the losses suffered during the 1972 campaign. Many posts were consequently filled by officers with lower ranks than the required level. (ARVN)

Roughly only half of the 1,100,000 men in the ARVN were part of the regular units, the rest belonging to the territorial force. This machine gunner carries the standard M60 LMG. (ARVN)

One of the main problems for the ARVN was its tendency to succumb to what was referred as the 'family syndrome'. Massive general mobilization meant that many troops had their families living near the positions they were defending. On many occasions, they broke rank to save their relatives when the enemy overcame their lines. This unit of the regional force is being displaced to a new location with their wives and children on Toyota DW 15L trucks. (US Army)

In addition to the armed forces, South Vietnam relied on a police force of 60,000 men. That included the Police Field Force, a paramilitary force of 21,000 men under the command of the police mobile operations department, organized into battalions and tactical mobile groups. Their main missions were intelligence-gathering, counter-terrorism, riot control, and urban fighting. It also had a single armored unit equipped with obsolete M8 Greyhound armored cars at Saigon. (ARVN)

South Vietnam had various special forces units, mostly grouped within the Strategic Technical Directorate. The Vietnamese Navy had also set up its own, including the most elite 200-strong SEALS team. Some of those commandos pose here with their weapons of choice, the AK-47 rifle and the Swedish M45 SMG, and one man has an M79 grenade launcher. (US Navy)

Half of the ARVN strength belonged to the territorial force for pacification operations. That included the PF: some 200,000 men organized at district and village levels into platoons. These part-time guards, armed here with M1 and M2 carbines, were of little value against the regular motorized North Vietnamese army. (ARVN)

The ARVN strategic reserve consisted of the elite Marine and Airborne Divisions, the only ones to have real nationwide mobility. Used as fire brigades to save desperate situations, particularly the airborne, they suffered heavy losses during the 1972 campaign. These two paratroopers hide behind an M113 APC near Quang Tri. (ARVN)

A tough-looking marine stands guard in front of the headquarters of the Marine 369th Brigade in early 1973 in retaken Quang Tri. The marines were attached to the ARVN I Corps until the fall of Da Nang in March 1975. (USMC)

The Vietnamese Navy had very limited seagoing capability, with only two destroyers, seven frigates and eight patrol craft escorts of the Task Group III. Three frigates of the Barnegat-class, the HQ-2 *Tran Quang Khai*, HQ-6 *Tran Quoc Toan*, and HQ-5 *Tran Binh Trong*, are mooring at Saigon's harbor. (US Navy)

Most of the Vietnamese Navy ships were small specialized craft designed to operate in inland waters or the vast Mekong Delta area of the River Patrol Force, subdivided into 14 river patrol groups. The monitor and command and control boats (CCB), some seen here during a parade, were the main fire support ships during riverine operations, armed with 40mm gun or 105mm howitzer, 81mm mortars, and machine guns. Some 42 were operated by the VNN. (US Navy)

brigade usually controlled one tank squadron (M48) and two cavalry squadrons (M41 and M113), with one infantry or ranger regiment and two artillery battalions (105mm) attached. The 4th Armored Brigade deployed in the Mekong Delta did not have tanks, only the amphibious-capable M113s. In 1974 two further composite battalions (M48 and M41 tanks and M113 APCs) were created at the Armor School at Thu Duc, near Saigon, with vehicles in depots. In March 1975 the Armored Corps fielded about 1,700 M113s and variants but only 480 tanks. The ARVN armored corps was a well-trained force that usually displayed better tactical flexibility than their adversary. The ARVN gunners were also better trained in long-range shooting as was demonstrated on several occasions in 1972.

The South Vietnamese artillery force displayed a numerical superiority compared to that of the PAVN. Nevertheless, an important part of that artillery was dispersed in numerous two-gun platoons in countless territorial force outposts for road or population centers security missions. In 1975 the ARVN artillery had forty-one 105mm battalions (36 divisional, five non-divisional), fifteen 155mm battalions (11 divisional, four non-divisional), five M107 175mm self-propelled battalions, two-hundred-and-four 105mm territorial platoons, and four air defense artillery battalions (40mm Bofor, M42 SPs and 20mm Vulcan) with a total of about 1,500 tubes.

The ARVN strategic reserve consisted of the two elite airborne and marine divisions. They were the only force to have real nationwide mobility. The two divisions were grouped together to spearhead the counter-offensive to retake Quang Tri in 1972. However, they became a permanent part of the defense of the MR I that faced superior enemy forces deployed in the area or just on the other side of the North Vietnamese border. This deployment was intended initially to be temporary. Nevertheless, over time they became an integral part of the I Corps constituent that left the ARVN without any reserves available. The idea of setting up a second marine division was quickly dropped when the DAO informed the JGS that it would not funded it as well as additional infantry divisions. The Marine Division was finally expanded in January 1975 into four brigade-sized forces, four artillery battalions, an engineer battalion and an amphibious tractor battalion with 54 LVTP-5s. The Airborne Division was also expanded from three to four brigade-sized forces, four artillery battalions and an engineer battalion. To increase the number of maneuver units, it was also decided to regroup several RF battalions into regiment-sized groups of battalions. However, these units lacked mobility and firepower and could not compare to regular regiments. Furthermore, the scheme could not be fully developed with the cuts to US aid. The number of RF battalions was meanwhile increased from 189 to 339 to the detriment of the PF force, which disbanded many of its platoons to be merged into RF battalions. Finally, by January 1974, the original 54 ranger battalions had been reorganized into 45, and each belonged to one of 15 ranger groups (regiments). All now had a standardized table of organization, instead of 'heavy' and 'border defense' battalions.

The Vietnamese Navy (VNN) grew from 18,000 men in the fall of 1968 to 42,000 men and 1,500 ships, boats and other craft in 1973. That force helped to maintain the main waterways under South Vietnamese control until the end, notably in the Mekong Delta. It had five coastal zone commands. The 1st, 2nd, and 3rd Coastal Zones worked with the respective ARVN corps commands. The 5th and 6th Coastal Zones were in the Mekong Delta area and worked with the ARVN IV Corps. There were also the Riverine and Sea Operations Commands. The Sea Force offered useful transportation capacities with its LSTs but its corvettes and destroyer-like types had little capability against a true blue-water navy adversary.

The Vietnamese Air Force (VNAF) status is examined more thoroughly later because the Saigon government tried to factor in the possible withdrawal of the US air power that played such a crucial role during the 1972 fighting.

CHAPTER 4
THE CRUCIAL MODERNIZATION AND EXPANSION OF THE VNAF

If the reshuffling of the ARVN before the ceasefire date was a concern for the Saigon government, it was mostly the reorganization and expansion of the VNAF that came as a top priority. The South Vietnamese were fully aware that air power had played a crucial role in blunting the last North Vietnamese offensive. Now that the US had gone, the role had to be taken over by the VNAF, a force woefully inadequate in size and equipment to deal with the task. Most of the Enhance and Enhance Plus programs were aimed at improving the effectiveness of the VNAF. But contrary to South Vietnamese hopes, the delivered equipment was of the same quality as that already delivered, and was often second-hand aircraft. As it was already planned, the VNAF had indeed been expanded during the Vietnamization process starting at the end of 1968, but it was then envisaged as only a force mainly focused on close- air support and counter-insurgency operations, with a huge expansion of the helicopter units. But the new conventional warfare now being fought found that force unable to fulfill such important missions as the interdiction of enemy logistics lines in Laos or North Vietnam or long-range reconnaissance sorties. For several years, the VNAF requested more advanced types of combat aircraft and in July 1968, a Plan 6 CRIMP was reviewed where it was envisaged that future VNAF requirements would be fulfilled with 36 F-4D Phantoms and 127 A-7 Corsairs. The scheme was hotly debated and postponed. The VNAF raised the question again in a series of meetings between 1969 and the end of 1971. The Nixon administration agreed on a principle that the VNAF would receive four squadrons of older F-4C Phantoms.

But the VNAF would be disappointed by the US response. Instead of Phantoms and Corsairs, the service had to contend with additional A-37s, F-5As and even obsolete A-1s. The core of the fighter force would now be the F-5A, destined to be replaced in the near future by its improved F-5E version. In addition, all these F-5As were second-hand aircraft and most of them were not even readily available in the US. In fact, Washington was forced to scrounge some allied air forces to obtain the required airframes. South Korea, a strong supporter of South Vietnam and which had deployed an expeditionary force of nearly 50,000 soldiers throughout the conflict, was the first to respond to Washington's plea by delivering 36 F-5As. The Shah of Iran was also willing to help Saigon and dispatched 32 F-5As with an important stock of spare parts. Taiwan also dispatched 48 of its own F-5As. Both former South Korean and Taiwanese aircraft were in theory to be returned to their owners by 31 July 1974. From the USAF stocks also came nine F-5As; apart from the planes delivered by the US, the other machines were considered as on loan only.

The new F-5E was without doubt an improvement over the F-5A. However, the plane still lacked advanced electronic countermeasure equipment (ECM) that could allow it to operate in a high-risk environment. By waiting, the delivered F-5As equipped a total of six squadrons. In the meantime, Enhance Plus also brought in an additional 90 A-37Bs that permitted the raising of three more squadrons. The last 28 USAF A-1s still present in South East Asia were also handed over to the VNAF, bolstering the three squadrons that operated the 70 remaining Skyraiders. If the VNAF fighter force excelled in close-air support, these efforts did not reach the level previously offered by the USAF. It was also more inexperienced in air-to-air operations than the North Vietnamese Air Force.

Project Enhance Plus was a last-minute effort to deliver additional aircraft to the VNAF before the ceasefire. This group of nine F-5As came from the USAF stock and were stored at Bien Hoa AB in early 1973. (USAF)

A group of US contracted civilian technicians are working on the reassembly of just-delivered F-5As from Iran in February 1973. The aircraft still sport their desert camouflage. (USAF)

The VNAF also continued expanding its transport force. On the eve of the North Vietnamese Easter Offensive, the service had one squadron on C-47s, one on C-119Gs, and three on C-123Ks. They performed well in view of the difficult circumstances. The transports were engaged in resupplying ARVN encircled positions, notably at Kontum and An Loc despite heavy AA artillery. Several C-123s and C-119s were shot down or destroyed on the ground by enemy artillery, and 15 others were damaged. From May 1972, the VNAF also joined its effort with the USAF C-130s in High Altitude Low Opening (HALO) parachute drops to lessen the losses. Ten beacon transponders were installed on some C-119s and C-123s to fulfill these missions, in conjunction with two mobile MSQ-77 search ground radars that had been transferred to VNAF control. In addition to participating in combat missions, the VNAF Airlift Control Center (ALCC) that commanded all the transport assets had to supervise the creation of

A VNAF soldier stands guard in front of a parking full of F-5As delivered by Iran. The Shah of Iran transferred some 32 F-5As to the Saigon government that were surplus to requirements. (USAF)

three additional squadrons on C-7 Caribous. A total of 56 Caribous were at least handed over to the South Vietnamese.

Despite the increasing size of the transport fleet, it appeared that it was not enough to meet the needs of the ARVN. The VNAF would then be unable to sustain the various air bridges without the help of the USAF C-130s. Also, to rationalize the transport fleet and modernize it, the VNAF had requested to standardize its equipment on the Hercules. Included now on Enhance Plus was the provision of 32 C-130As to the VNAF. The purpose was to replace all the C-123s, C-119s, and C-47s with the new aircraft. All the planes came from units of the Air National Guard or of the USAF Reserve. The planes were ferried across the Pacific from 29 October to 6 November 1972. By 24 February 1973, some 32 crews had been fully qualified and served to set up two squadrons. With a reliability rate of more than 75 percent for the fleet at the end of the year, the VNAF could be satisfied with its Hercules, but that trend diminished when structural metal fatigues and frequent lack of spare parts grounded more and more airframes for lengthy periods of maintenance. By early 1975, the VNAF had to make do with between 9 and 14 operational C-130s per day, forcing it to retain in service the older C-47s and C-119s.

Since 1969 the VNAF helicopter fleet had been tremendously expanded to propel the ARVN into airmobile operations in the same way as that done by the US Army. When the communists launched their offensive in 1972 the VNAF fielded 13 helicopter squadrons manned by 1,400 pilots. Although the Vietnam War experienced a great development in airmobile tactics to counter guerrilla attacks, the recent changing nature of the conflict led many to question the wisdom of continuing that policy for the young VNAF. On the eve

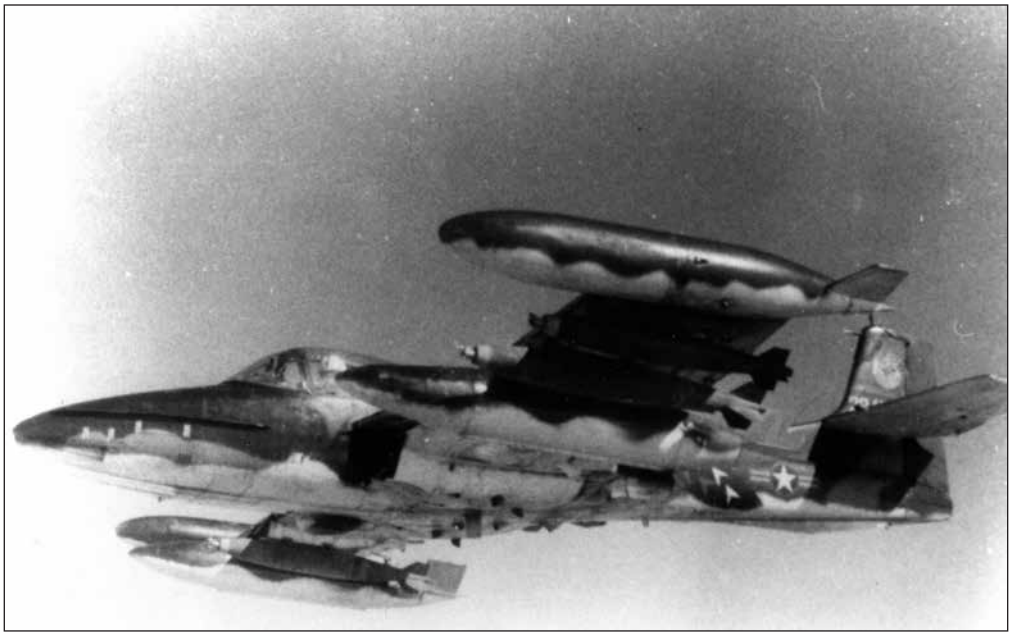
The VNAF expanded its F-5A fleet from a single to a six-squadron force thanks to the deliveries of projects Enhance and Enhance Plus. This flight of four F-5As of the 540th Fighter Squadron was photographed during a strike sortie in the ARVN III Corps area at the end of 1973. (VNAF)

of the North Vietnamese invasion, the VNAF had 628 UH-1Hs but the losses had been heavy during the campaign: 63 Hueys shot down and 391 others damaged. Facing an increasingly sophisticated enemy air defense, the helicopter force appeared vulnerable. Furthermore, the performances of the VNAF helicopter force had been heavily criticised. These recently created squadrons were mainly staffed by young and inexperienced pilots thrown immediately into the battle.

Some 300 additional UH-1Hs were delivered in 1972 through Enhance, helping to raise the number of Huey squadrons to 19 and to replace the losses. Most of these machines came from the departing

Lieutenant Colonel Dam Thuong Vu, commander of the 536th Fighter Squadron of Bien Hoa AB, briefs his men before another bombing sortie at the end of 1973. This was one of the newly raised five additional squadrons of F-5As. (VNAF)

A just-delivered Cessna A-37B waits to be made serviceable before being assigned to a VNAF squadron at Phu Cat AB. In the background is an AC-47D gunship of the 817th Attack Squadron. (USAF)



Project Enhance Plus also brought in an extra 90 A-37Bs that allowed the raising of three more squadrons, making a total of nine flying on the type. Although a good close-air support aircraft, the type now clearly lacked the required performance to operate in a high-threat environment when faced by the North Vietnamese anti-aircraft defense system. (USAF)

Included in Enhance Plus was the provision of 32 C-130A transports to the VNAF. The idea was to replace all the C-123s, C-119s, and C-47s with the new aircraft. But for various reasons, excepting the C-123s, the other types remained in service until the fall of Saigon. (Pham Quang Khiem)

US Army aviation units. To compensate this transfer of equipment to the VNAF, a new contract of $27.4 million was placed in March 1973 for 180 new UH-1Hs. Enhance Plus brought in an additional 286 UH-1Hs and 23 CH-47As to the South Vietnamese, increasing the total number of helicopters in February 1973 to 929. They were used to establish six more squadrons and eight flights for medevac operations on Hueys. These flights were later regrouped within a group-sized squadron. In fact, some 109 UH-1Hs were assigned to this last task of battlefield medical evacuations. Nevertheless, a scheme to acquire 48 UH-1Ns for longer-range SAR operations was never fulfilled. Some 420 extra helicopter pilots had graduated by the summer of 1972. Furthermore, it was decided to bring the strength of each Huey squadron to 38 machines. The new table of organization of each UH-1H squadron now had 12 gunships, three command and control aircraft and 23 troop transports. The lack of a true gunship to protect the transport helicopter, or to hunt enemy tanks, was the most notable problem. As early as July 1968, during discussions for Plan 6 of the CRIMP, it was envisaged that the VNAF would receive at least a squadron of Bell AH-1G Cobras. But the project was never financed. It was subsequently decided to create two new Chinook squadrons as well. That would allow having one squadron of CH-47s for each military regions. In October 1972 some 90 Huey pilots were sent to the US to train on the new machine. Even if the figures seemed impressive, the VNAF helicopter force had to be compared with the availability of more than 5,000 US machines at the height of US involvement in Vietnam.

However, one of the most lacking requirements for the VNAF concerned observation and reconnaissance tasks. The VNAF had eight observation squadrons, the last one raised in August 1972, equipped with Cessna O-1s and U-17s, that performed visual reconnaissance and forward air control (FAC) tasks. During the 1972 operations, the VNAF FACs generally performed poorly over their areas of operation for many reasons. Firstly, the VNAF FAC aircraft proved very vulnerable to enemy heavy anti-aircraft defenses. To survive in those high-threat areas, the VNAF was forced to operate at higher altitude or even to avoid entering zones covered by SAMs and heavy AA guns. Too often, the VNAF relinquished these missions to USAF FACs, usually flying OV-10 Broncos. In the most dangerous sectors the US also operated what it called 'Fast FACs' with specially

A total of 56 C-7Bs were handed over to the VNAF, equipping three squadrons. This trio of Caribous of the 427th Transport Squadron overfly the coastline during a transport mission in the ARVN I Corps area. (Le Hong Duc)

equipped F-4 Phantoms. The VNAF had none of this equipment. Occasionally, however, the VNAF used the A-37B in a FAC role in high-threat areas but the aircraft lacked suitable communications equipment. To modernize the FAC fleet some 35 Cessna O-2As were delivered through Enhance Plus. By July 1973, the VNAF had some 256 FAC aircraft, including 35 O-2s, 56 U-17s, and 165 O-1s. Some 16 of the U-17s had been modified for psychological warfare, equipped for leaflet dropping and with loudspeakers.

Other reconnaissance assets were limited to a few RF-5As, with limited range and photo-camera performance. They were supplemented by a squadron that was a collection of various aircraft intended for photo, radio-intercept missions, and psychological warfare operations: a fleet of 17 U-6 Beavers, including eight equipped for radio-intercept or leaflet drops and loudspeaker broadcasting, five RC-47Ds, two EC-47Ds, and two C-47Ds. The RC-47Ds had improved infrared systems that could locate the enemy through heat-source imagery. It was now urgent to improve the VNAF electronic warfare capacity. The USAF then decided to hand over to the South Vietnamese its remaining EC-47s on the theater, including more advanced versions such as the EC-47Q/P that had more sophisticated ALR-34 equipment for electronic signals intelligence (ELINT) missions and even a limited jamming capability. Some 36 of them were handed over in January 1973 and represented a great improvement, but even with them the VNAF still

The VNAF continued the expansion of its helicopter fleet, bringing the number of Bell UH-1H-equipped squadrons to 19 in 1973, with more than 850 machines in total. (Pham Quang Khiem)

By early 1973, the strength of each UH-1H squadron was increased to 38 machines, including 12 in gunship configuration. However, they could not adequately replace the departing US Army Bell AH-1Gs. The VNAF tried in vain to obtain at least a squadron of Cobra helicopters. (Pham Quang Khiem)

didn't have any high-speed reconnaissance sensor platforms.

The last expansion phase of the VNAF in term of equipment deliveries took place in a remarkably short timeframe. Shipments under Enhance Plus were made by sea and air. The first US cargo aircraft arrived at Tan Son Nhut airbase on 23 October 1972, and the last shipment arrived at Newport, near Saigon, on 12 December. Nearly 5,000 short tons came by air and 100,000 short tons by sea. One of the reasons for this hasty build-up was the constraining conditions imposed by the Paris Peace Accords, which stipulated that no military-equipment deliveries were authorized after the ceasefire came into effect. Only a replacement program on a basis of "one for one" was allowed to replace losses and normal attrition of its equipment. In just seven weeks, the South Vietnamese hurriedly took charge of 618 additional aircraft. That included 236 fighters with 116 F-5As, 90 A-37Bs, and 28 A-1s. The transport fleet was augmented by 39 extra cargo planes, including 32 C-130As and four C-7As, in addition to 23 EC-47s and 22 AC-119Ks. Some 35 O-2As were pressed into service with the observation squadrons, as well as 24 T-37C jet trainers. The helicopter force was augmented by 23 CH-47As and 307 UH-1Hs. This extra equipment allowed the creation of 13 other squadrons: two on CH-47s, three on A-37s, two on C-130s, and five on F-5s. By 25 January 1973 the VNAF had a total of 2,075 aircraft, including 164 aircraft stored as reserve, served by 61,700 personnel, including 3,500 pilots, making it one of the largest air forces in the world.

At the start of 1973, the VNAF decision to opt for an all-out expansion process and self-sufficiency showed promising results. To the amazement of many US observers, the service had simultaneously absorbed an incredible increase in a very short time and in the meantime continued to wage combat operations. There were still many shortcomings in both operational and maintenance fields, but nothing that would make its operational capability collapse. It seemed like the withdrawal of the US advisers had forced the South Vietnamese to act decisively in the face of a deteriorating military situation. Whatever the results achieved, the VNAF did not have the capabilities to conduct bombardments of North Vietnam due to lack of equipment and training. It was clearly a force tailored for only low-level operations and did not have the equipment, such as high-performance fighter-bombers, air-to-air refueling, and counter-measure electronic equipment, to face the emerging mechanized North Vietnamese force. Most at all, it could not launch a strategic air campaign against North Vietnam. That task could only be done by US airpower, a possibility that could still be exercised according to the promises made to Thieu by Nixon.

To enforce the truce with air power as had been promised, the USAF established a new headquarters at Nakhon Phanom in Thailand, the United States Support Activities Group – 7th air force under General Vogt, who had come there with his staff from South Vietnam. The new command exercised control over 18 USAF fighter-bomber squadrons, one reconnaissance squadron, and a detachment of USMC combat aircraft. General Vogt also coordinated with the US Navy's carrier task force in waters nearby and with the Strategic Air Command, which had some 200 B-52 bombers in the Western Pacific available to resume the bombing of North Vietnam. Although the US withdrew from South Vietnam, the USAF still maintained a strong residual force in Thailand, which served as a deterrence in case of renewed hostilities. But the progressive disengagement of the US from Indochinese affairs contributed to a decline in US strength as the months passed.

Of the 43,000 men and 500 aircraft stationed in Thailand, Washington announced that 3,500 men and 100 aircraft would be withdrawn. In fact, US air operations ceased in South East Asia only on 15 August 1973 with the end of the air campaigns over Cambodia. Even if this force declined thereafter, by the end of 1973 it still consisted of the 388th Tactical Fighter Wing at Korat of F-4Es, A-7Ds and F-105Gs; the 347th Tactical Fighter Wing at Takhli of F-111As; the 8th Tactical Fighter Wing at Ubon of F-4D/Es and the 16th SOS of AC-130s; and the 56th Special Operation Wing at Nakhon Phanom of HH-53s and HC-130s. The main reconnaissance assets were the 432nd Tactical Reconnaissance Wing at Udorn with RF-4Cs and two squadrons of F-4Ds. There were also detachments of U-2s at U Tapao. The Strategic Air Command also maintained the 364th and 365th Bombardment Squadrons of B-52 bombers as well as the 901st Air Refuelling Squadron of KC-135s at U Tapao. However, at the end of 1974, only 12 tactical fighter squadrons and 25 B-52s remained in Thailand.

CHAPTER 5
THE COMMUNIST ARMED FORCES

In January 1973 the PAVN deployed about 570,000 regular troops of its 'main force'. Out of this total, some 290,000 remained in North Vietnam. About 70,000 were operating in Laos and 25,000 in Cambodia. Some 219,000 others were deployed inside South Vietnam, including about 148,000 combat troops and 71,000 administrative and logistical troops. They were reinforced by 500,000 men serving with the logistics command and the anti-aircraft defense command. They were supplemented by those of the Militia Command of some two million men and women, including 870,000 light infantry organized into platoons and companies. A regional force was drawn from the best of the militia, organized into battalions and totaling 51,000 men. The other militias served in the anti-aircraft artillery or logistics units in the north, out of a total population of 16 million. You can gauge the degree of total mobilization of the country for the war. The Viet Cong combat troops had slumped to 25,000 men and the underground political–military infrastructure was estimated at 110,000 men. The declining Viet Cong strength continued to concern the communist leadership, which encountered many difficulties in their recruitment campaigns. The expansion plans of these "liberation army" units for the period 1973–74 was a dismal failure, with only 30 percent of its manpower goals fulfilled. They were officially dependent on the Central Office For South Vietnam (COSVN), the military wing of the National Liberation Front (NLF), a fictitious designation to style the Viet Cong for propaganda purposes. In fact, Hanoi was now forced to bolster the ranks of the declining units of the Viet Cong and the COSVN was no more than a forward command post of the general headquarters of the PAVN back at Hanoi.

North Vietnam was administratively divided into four military regions (MRs), and South Vietnam was organized into five other MRs. These southern MRs had been grouped into five military theaters or fronts: the B1 Front covering the coastal zone expanding from Da Nang to Cam Ranh; the B2 Front was the COSVN operational area, roughly covering the southern half of South Vietnam; the B3 Front covering the Central Highlands area; and the B4 Front covering an area extending from the DMZ to the Hai Van Pass, south of Hue; and the B5 Front covering the DMZ proper and the southern part of North Vietnam. Under Colonel General Tran Van Tra's command, the COSVN was in fact the greatest operational command in the south,

As soon as the rails communications, destroyed by the US air attacks of 1972, had been restored between China and North Vietnam in early 1973, the Chinese rushed in civilian and military equipment to rebuild the shattered PAVN units. These Type 59 tanks and engineering tractors are being loaded on these flatcars for deliveries across the border. (PAVN)

The Soviets also delivered military equipment to the North Vietnamese as soon as Haiphong harbor had been cleared of mines. These T-54 tanks are being taken on charge near Hanoi. (PAVN)

The X32 Armor Maintenance Depot in Hanoi repaired and returned into service dozens of damaged armored vehicles after the ceasefire. These two T-54s are being overhauled. (PAVN)

The PAVN was always lacking in APCs for a full mechanization of its infantry. The main APC was the Chinese-built K-63 (YW531) alongside the Soviet BTR-50, BTR-60, and BTR-152. These K-63s are parading during the National Day of 2 September 1974 in front of the newly built mausoleum for the late chairman Ho Chi Minh in Hanoi. (PAVN)

In February 1973 the PAVN 126th Assault Sapper Regiment was retrained as the 126th Naval Infantry Regiment. The unit was supplemented by the Navy Naval Sapper Group that had been created in 1966, establishing the first amphibious force set up in North Vietnam. These naval infantry troops were trained in storming a beach with BTR-60 APCs. (PAVN)

encompassing the B2 Front and subdivided into four MRs: MR 6 that covered the northwestern part of the B2 Front; MR 7 that encompassed roughly the greatest part of the ARVN III Corps area with Saigon at its heart; MR 8 that covered the northern Mekong Delta area; and MR 9 covering the southern half of the Mekong Delta.

Soviet and Chinese military and economic assistance to North Vietnam increased after the ceasefire. CIA estimates indicated that North Vietnam received a record 2.8 million metric tons of imported commodities during 1973. This volume was more than 50 percent greater than that received during 1972 and more than 10 percent higher than the previous record set in 1971. The trend continued throughout 1974, when more than 3.5 million tons were received. A substantial part of that aid package was channeled toward the civilian sector to rebuild the shattered infrastructures and industrial base. The military deliveries allowed the PAVN to quickly recover, deploying in terms of heavy equipment the level it had at the beginning of the Easter Offensive of the preceding year, before slightly surpassing it. In fact, both Peking and Moscow for various reasons did not want to expand Hanoi's military capabilities. Russia tried to preserve the recent dialog with the US over the limitation of strategic weapons and China hoped to improve its newly developed contacts with Washington.

The PAVN expansion process continued throughout the Easter Offensive, despite the huge losses suffered. They were partly filled by the drafting in 1973 of 150,000 young recruits. The number of regular battalion then rose from 149 in 1969 to 285 in December 1972. In 1973 the PAVN main force was expanded from 16 to 20 infantry divisions, including five training divisions in North Vietnam: the 304B, 320B, 330th, 335th, and 350th Divisions. The other 15 divisions, 27 separate infantry and sapper regiments, and 140 separate infantry, tank, or artillery battalions were deployed in South Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. After the heavy losses suffered during the 1972 Nguyen Hue campaign, the PAVN high command decided to reinforce and reorganize its forces. Learning the lessons of the recent combats, it decided firstly to reconstitute a strategic reserve, and secondly to expand the regular formations into combined-arms army corps. In January 1973 the PAVN set up two new regular motorized infantry divisions with the 305th and 305B Divisions in North Vietnam. Two more divisions were soon to return to North Vietnam from Quang Tri Province, the 312th and 320B, and later the 316th Division came back from Laos. The 341st Division was recreated in the southern part of North Vietnam and the 338th Division was converted into a regular line infantry division. That brought up the strategic reserve to seven divisions. Although the ARVN was now forbidden to benefit from the help of US advisers, some 3,000 Soviet advisers and technicians were supporting the expanding PAVN, with dozens of Chinese, Cubans, and other Warsaw Pact personnel.

One of the main problems in raising such new units was the availability of officers and other cadre personnel. Many of the experienced officers had been killed in 1972, so an effort was made to recruit and train new ones. The academies of the Military Study Institutes devised a plan to train additional cadets who saw their basic training expanded from one year to two years, with supplemental training being carried out from six months to a year in their affected infantry divisions. The high command also conducted a series of

The PAVN always appreciated using light reconnaissance tanks in addition to their main battle tanks, such as the Soviet PT-76 or the Chinese Type 63. Despite being lightly armored and armed, their amphibious capabilities were well adapted to operate in swampy terrain or rice fields. (PAVN)

The North Vietnamese not only replaced their lost artillery pieces during the 1972 campaign but also expanded their artillery corps by creating new units thanks to Soviet and Chinese deliveries. All the PAVN motorized divisions now had their own artillery regiments. These artillerymen are training on the newly delivered Soviet 152mm D-20 guns. (PAVN)

The North Vietnamese most potent artillery piece was the M-46 130mm gun that outranged most of the ARVN guns and howitzers. However, while the Hanoi's allies delivered new guns, they withheld a great part of the requested ammunitions, a factor that would have its importance for the coming campaign. (PAVN)

training for the staff and command procedures, each session being three to six months long. A group of selected officers, under the command of Senior Colonel Nguyen Huu An, was also sent to the Soviet Union to attend a course on combined-arms operations that would pay immense dividends later.

These new divisions saw their tables of organization standardized along three infantry regiments, one artillery regiment, and several specialties supporting branch battalions. Whereas in 1972 only the 304th and 308th Divisions had their own artillery regiments, all the motorized divisions now had their own. The artillery branch was reorganized on three levels: the strategic reserve subordinated to the Artillery Command; the fronts and MRs artillery; and division-level artillery organized into regiment and brigade sizes. By the end of 1974 the strategic reserve artillery had six brigades, 28 regiments, 17 separate battalions, and six separate batteries, held in North Vietnam or directly attached to the different fronts in the south. Some 16 regiments were also allocated to the motorized infantry divisions. There were also 98 batteries, 15 independent platoons, and 52 gun sections placed under the command of various local theaters. Out of this total, some three brigades, 21 regiments, 21 battalions, and 91 independent batteries equipped with 1,176 artillery pieces were deployed in South Vietnam. Some 350 of them were the D-74 122mm and M-46 130mm guns that outranged most of the ARVN pieces.

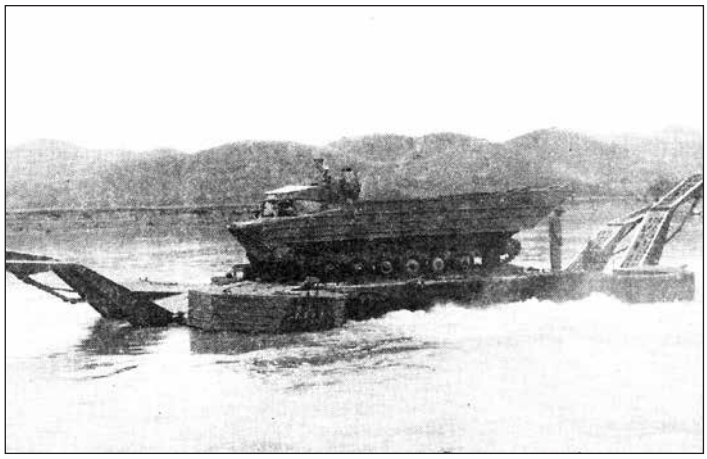
Great efforts were also made to rebuild the armored force. At the ceasefire date, there were only 115 tanks operational in the south. In addition to new deliveries from China and the Soviet Union, mobile

Learning the hard way the lessons of the costly campaign of 1972, the North Vietnamese decided to expand its Engineering Corps by acquiring a great number of specialized equipment, such as motorized barges, amphibious tractors, or pontoon bridges. These engineer troops are being trained how to deploy TPP floating bridges sections. (PAVN)

The North Vietnamese Air Defense Command received some S-125 Pechora systems (SA-3 Goa) in December 1972. However, they arrived too late to be engaged in combat before the ceasefire. The first units to be equipped with it were the 276th and 277th SAM Regiments. The VNAF had no ECM equipment to face this kind of threat. (PAVN)

These PAVN troops are training to assemble, side by side, two GSP tracked ferries. Note the PT-76 tank and the BTR-60 APC waiting in the background. (PAVN)

These T-54 tanks are on the verge to be carried on the GSP tracked ferries across a river during a training exercise. The PAVN had far more developed engineering capability than the ARVN. (PAVN)



Another tracked amphibious transport used by the PAVN was the K-61. Curiously, this vehicle is seen being ferried across a river atop GSP tracked ferries during a training exercise. (PAVN)

Another North Vietnamese specialized engineering vehicle was the BAV-485 amphibious truck. (PAVN)

Although most of the North Vietnamese specialists in electronics and radars were being trained in the Soviet Union, some were following courses in Czechoslovakia or Hungary, such as in this photo. (PAVN)

maintenance teams totaling 436 engineers and technicians roamed the southern battlefields to repair or recover disabled vehicles. They were brought back north where the X32 Armor Maintenance Depot in Hanoi overhauled and made operational again 246 armored vehicles as well as 461 tank guns. In summer 1973 the North Vietnamese could again deploy a force of 845 tanks and APCs. Top priority was now given to the expansion of the Armor Command: for the first time, the selection of officers and cadre personnel were assigned to that branch of the armed forces instead of the infantry and air defense command.

Troops from the PAVN 126th Naval Infantry Regiment disembark during training from a Soviet-built PTS tracked amphibious transport. The vehicle had a 10-ton pay load, four times the capacity of the BAV-485. (PAVN)

The most widespread anti-aircraft missile then in service with the North Vietnamese air defense command was the S-75 Dvina (SA-2 Guideline). Each battery (battalion for the PAVN) had six missile launchers deployed around an SNR-75 (Fang Song) fire control and tracking radar with a detection range of 65km. The system consisted of two groups of antennae operating on different frequencies: one providing elevation (altitude) information and the other azimuth (bearing) information. (PAVN)

The Armor School was brought up to academy status in April 1973. That institution formed 38 classes of 1,000 non-commissioned officers and warrant officers as well as four classes of 518 officers in 1973 and 1974. Specialized and staff training were taken up by selected men in the Soviet Union. Some 102 mechanic instructors were organized into mobile training teams that were dispatched to various units to train the tank crews on improving the maintenance of their vehicles. Rapidly, the operational rate of the tank force increased accordingly from 50 percent to 80 percent. A great effort was also dedicated to improving the training of the gunners, particularly long-range shooting.

However, one of the most wanting issues in the armored force development was the lack of mechanized infantry, already pointed out during the Easter Offensive in 1972. The new table of organization (TOT) called for mechanized regiments instead of pure tank units. But again, the PAVN was unable to expand that specialized branch by deploying only 400 APCs, mostly Chinese K-63s, as well as some BTR-50s, BTR-60s, and BTR-152s. To compensate, a company of 'mechanized infantry' was allocated to each PAVN tank battalion: the troops were displaced on trucks or even atop the tanks. The build-up continued with the reorganization and creation of new armored regiments, then their expansion into brigade-sized units. The current three armored regiments were rebuilt after the heavy losses

The North Vietnamese made great efforts to provide their newly raised armored units with accompanying anti-aircraft assets. Although most of them were towed anti-aircraft guns, they also deployed several ZSU-57-2s. (PAVN)

The North Vietnamese received their first ZSU-23-4s in December 1972, which equipped the 237th Anti-Aircraft Artillery Regiment. Some of them paraded during the National Day of 2 September 1974 in Hanoi. (PAVN)

As there were still not enough SP anti-aircraft vehicles, the PAVN adapted several declassed armored vehicles for this role. The Z153 Armor Maintenance Depot modified some T-34s as well as SU-76s into SP AA tanks with 23mm, 37mm, or 57mm guns. (PAVN)

The PAVN created its first chemical warfare unit by the early 1970s when confronting range of US chemical devices such as herbicide or CS gaz. These troops of the Chemical Warfare Group are wearing L-1 NBC protective suits during an exercise with a GAZ-69 light truck specially equipped for biological and radiological detection. (PAVN)

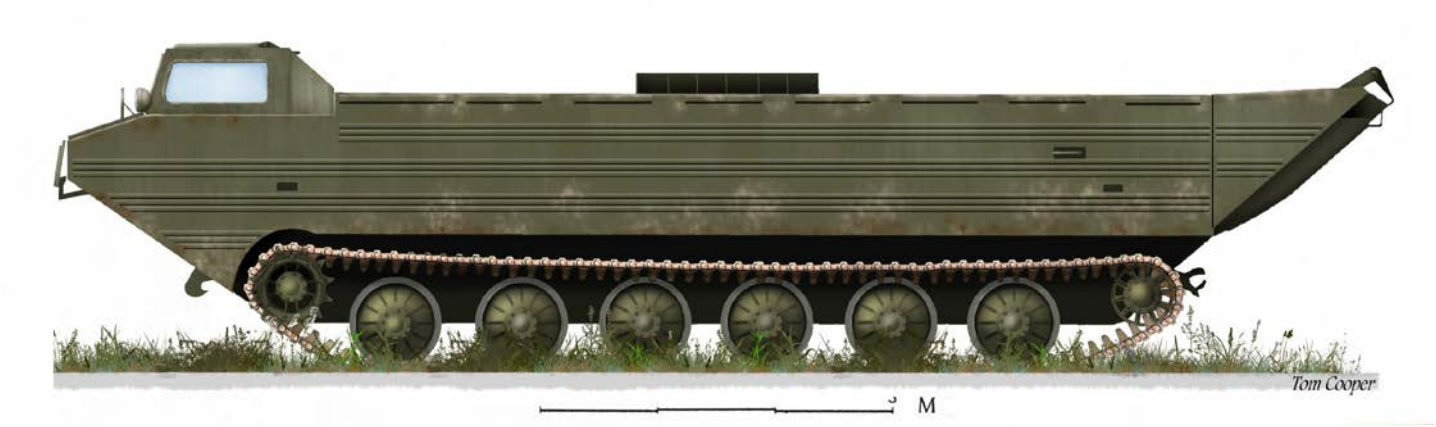
experienced in 1972 the 201st Regiment was reorganized into four tank battalions and six mechanized infantry companies on trucks; the 202nd had two tank battalions and two APC battalions; and the 203rd had four tank battalions, six mechanized infantry companies, and one SP AA company, with 64 tanks, 36 APCs, and some trucks as well as 16 ZSU-57-2s. The regimental-sized Armored Group 26 operating in the B2 Front, which was virtually destroyed during the An Loc battle in 1972, was slowly rebuilding with two depleted tank battalions and two mechanized battalions with a few BTR-60s and trucks. It was reinforced by the A25A and A25B independent companies equipped with captured M41 tanks and M113 APCs. It was only in early 1974 that the Armored Group 26 was expanded into an armored brigade with six armored battalions, including two with captured vehicles. The 273rd Armored Regiment was created on 3 February 1973 with what was remaining of the 297th Armored Battalion, which suffered heavily during the Kontum battle. The unit was reconstituted and expanded into four tank battalions and four mechanized companies on APCs and trucks by the year's end. The 574th Armored Regiment was created on 20 February 1973 to bolster the armor assets of the B4 Front in the DMZ – Da Nang area. The unit deployed three tank battalions, including the 177B Armored Battalion that had been operating in the area since March 1972, strengthened by two others detached from the 201st Armored Regiment of the General Central Reserve. That last one unit was soon reinforced by the newly raised 215th Armored Regiment, created on 10 April 1973 in Vinh Phu, with initially only two tank battalions.

The steady expansion of the North Vietnamese armored force continued and by mid-1974 it had a total of 29 armored battalions. US–ARVN intelligence at that date assessed the PAVN armor assets as deploying some 400 T-54s and Type 59s, 100 T-34/85s, and 200 PT-76s and Type 63s. They were supplemented by 50 SU-100 tank destroyers and a small number of ISU-122 SP guns. The fighting in 1972 also showed up the lack of self-propelled anti-aircraft guns to protect the tank units. The small number of ZSU-57-2s was insufficient to adequately protect the tanks from air attacks even if they were very useful in direct fire-support roles. A small number of additional ZSU-57-2s were delivered by the Soviets, as well as sufficiently sophisticated ZSU-23-4s to equip the 237th Anti-Aircraft Artillery Regiment, but there were still not enough SP anti-aircraft vehicles. The Z153 Armor

The North Vietnamese introduced tanks into South Vietnam during the Easter Offensive of 1972 but suffered heavily. The Chinese and the Soviets replenished the depleted armor units just after the ceasefire with several deliveries. This T-54B was part of a shipment that disembarked at Haiphong harbour in summer 1973.

The PAVN used a small number of self-propelled guns and tank destroyers, such as this SU-100 of the 207th Armoured Regiment in 1973. Note the different types of wheels indicating a vehicle rebuilt with whatever spare parts were available by the Z153 armor maintenance depot.

Not all the Soviet deliveries to replace the losses of the 1972 campaign were new equipment. This PT-76 of the PAVN 201st Armored Regiment was an initial production vehicle equipped with a D-56T 76.2mm gun with no two-axis stabilization system.



The North Vietnamese made great efforts to expand their engineer units by putting into service specialized vehicles, particularly those designed to ferry equipment across the country's numerous waterways. This PTS tracked amphibious tractor of the 299th Engineer Brigade of the 1st Strategic Army Corps had a 10-ton cargo load capacity.

The PAVN also deployed the GSP-55 tracked self-propelled ferry, which consisted of two non-interchangeable left and right half units (seen here) with large outer retractable pontoons. Two vehicles tied together could ferry a tank across a large waterway at a speed of 6km/h. This example is from the 219th Engineer Brigade of the 2nd Strategic Army Corps.

Another specialized vehicle used by the PAVN was the K-61 tracked amphibious tractor with a five-ton cargo load capacity. The K-61s were distributed among the five bridge-building and river-crossing regiments of the engineer corps.

An M48A3 Patton of the ARVN 20th Tank Squadron of the 1st Armored Brigade in 1973. The sandbags pilled over the turret were used as additional protection against shaped-charge RPG rounds, a common practice with the South Vietnamese tankers .

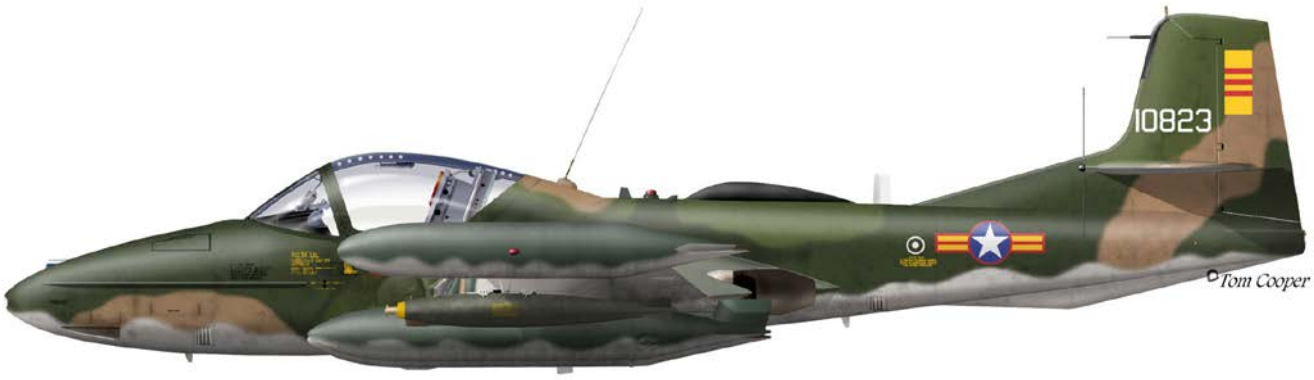
The South Vietnamese standard tank was the M41A3 Walker Bulldog. This vehicle belonged to the 18th Armored Cavalry Squadron attached to the ARVN 23rd Division during the Quang Duc campaign at the end of 1973.

An LVPT-5 of the amphibious tractor battalion of the South Vietnamese marine division. Some 31 of these vehicles were handed over by the US.

An F-5A (serial 63-8428) of the 538th Squadron of the 61st Tactical Wing at Da Nang in 1973. The aircraft is seen in air defense configuration, armed with two AIM-9B Sidewinder missiles.

An F-5A (serial 13318) of the 536th Squadron of the 63rd Tactical Wing at Bien Hoa in 1973. It is armed with the usual load of four Mk 82 500lb bombs.

An F-5A (serial 21213) of the 540th Squadron of the 63rd Tactical Wing at Bien Hoa in 1973. It is armed with four M117 750lb bombs. The desert camouflage indicates that it is a former aircraft of the imperial Iranian air force.



An A-37B (serial 10823) of the 550th Fighter Squadron of the 61st Tactical Wing at Da Nang in 1973. The unit was one of the newly raised A-37B squadrons in 1973.

An A-37B (serial 14805) of the 524th Fighter Squadron of the 62nd Tactical Wing at Phan Rang in 1973. It is armed with the usual load of six Mk 82 500lb bombs.

A VNAF C-119G (serial 0-38112) of the 720th Reconnaissance Squadron of the 53rd Tactical Wing at Tan Son Nhut in December 1973. Intended to be brought up to RC-119L standard for maritime patrol missions, the lack of funding scrubbed the scheme and the aircraft were retained in their traditional transport role, supplementing C-130As.

A C-7B (serial 63-9711) of the 427th Transport Squadron of the 41st Tactical Wing at Da Nang in 1973. The VNAF received 56 Caribous that equipped three transport squadrons.

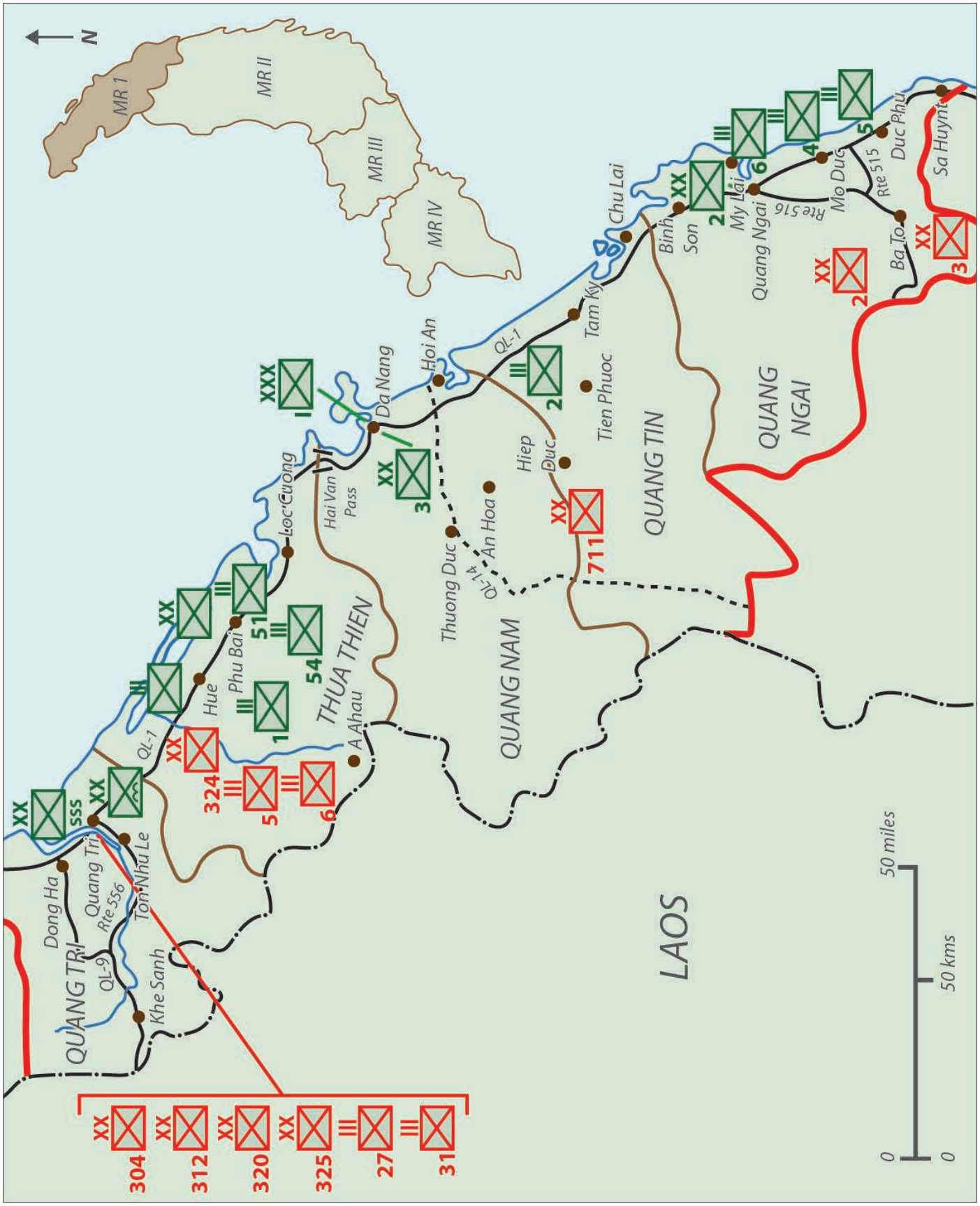
A C-7A of the international commission of control and supervision (ICCS). This was one of two Caribous contracted to Air America, the CIA-operated airline, used to displace the inspection teams.

One of the 30 VNAF UH-1Hs at the disposal of the ICCS inspection teams, alongside 26 Hueys of Air America. The helicopter sports the distinctive orange identification bands around the fuselage that indicate its neutral status.

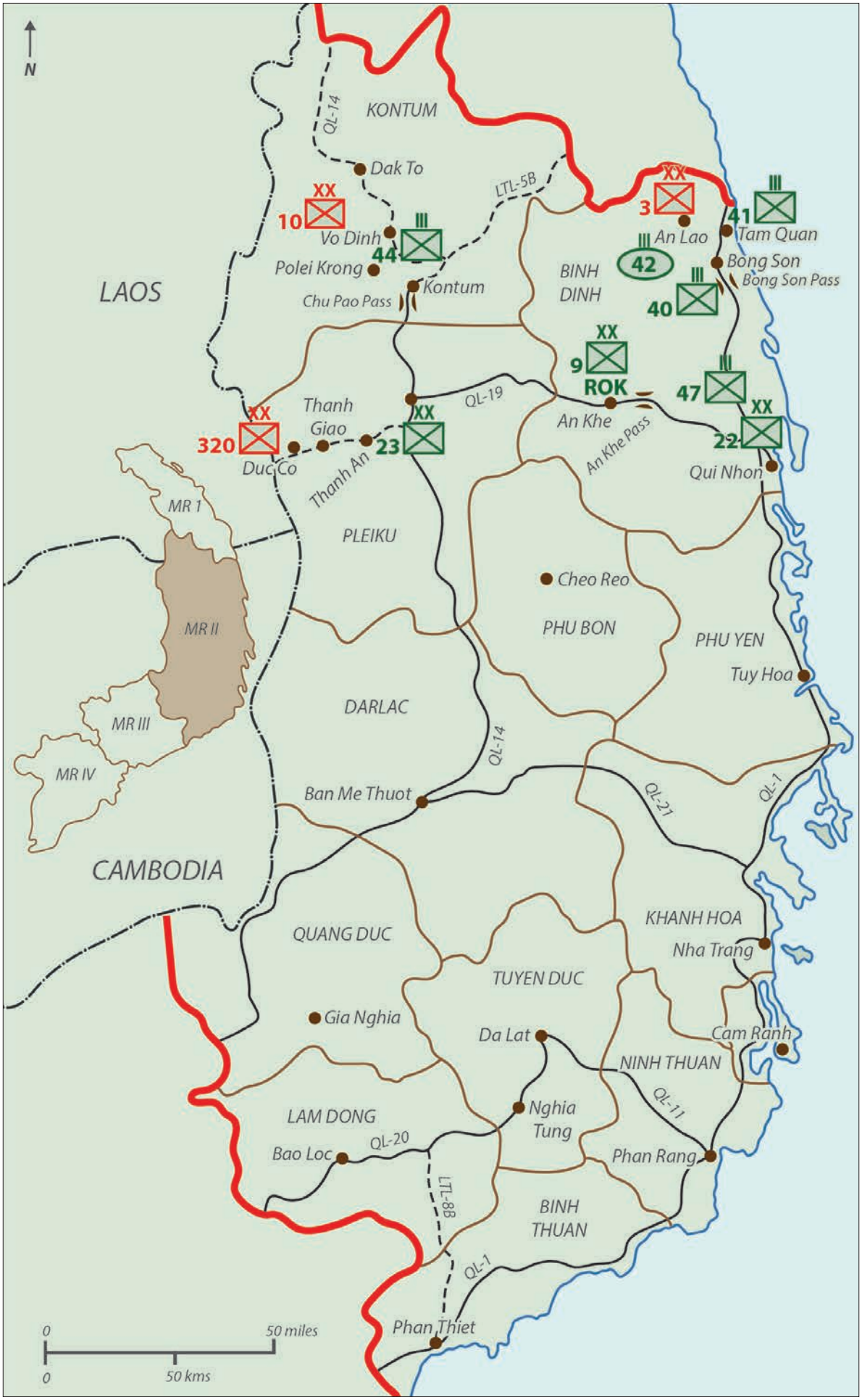
ARVN Tactical Corps.

PAVN Tactical Corps.

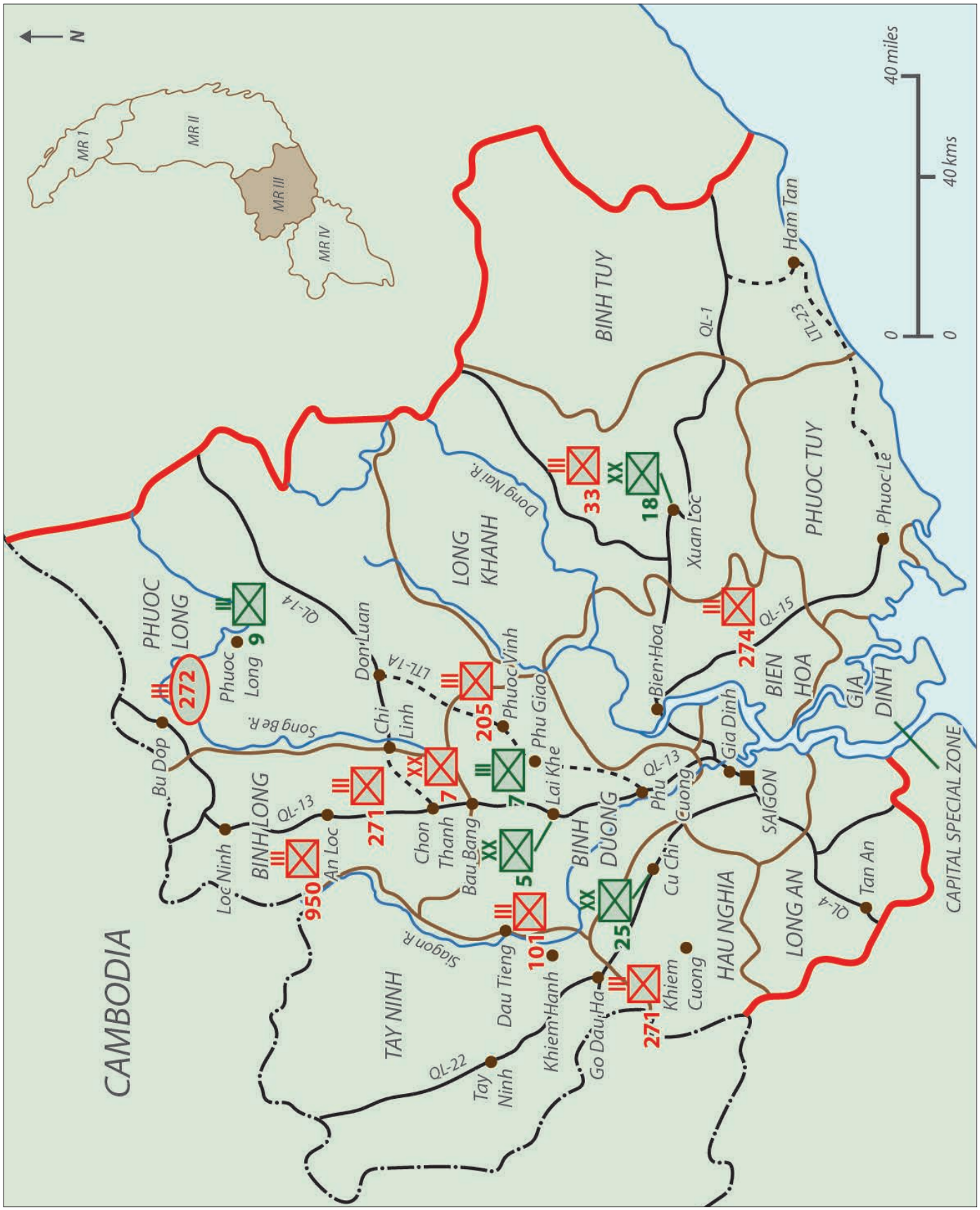
Land-grab fighting, January–February 1973.



ARVN I Corps - Military Region 1 the military balance, January 1973.

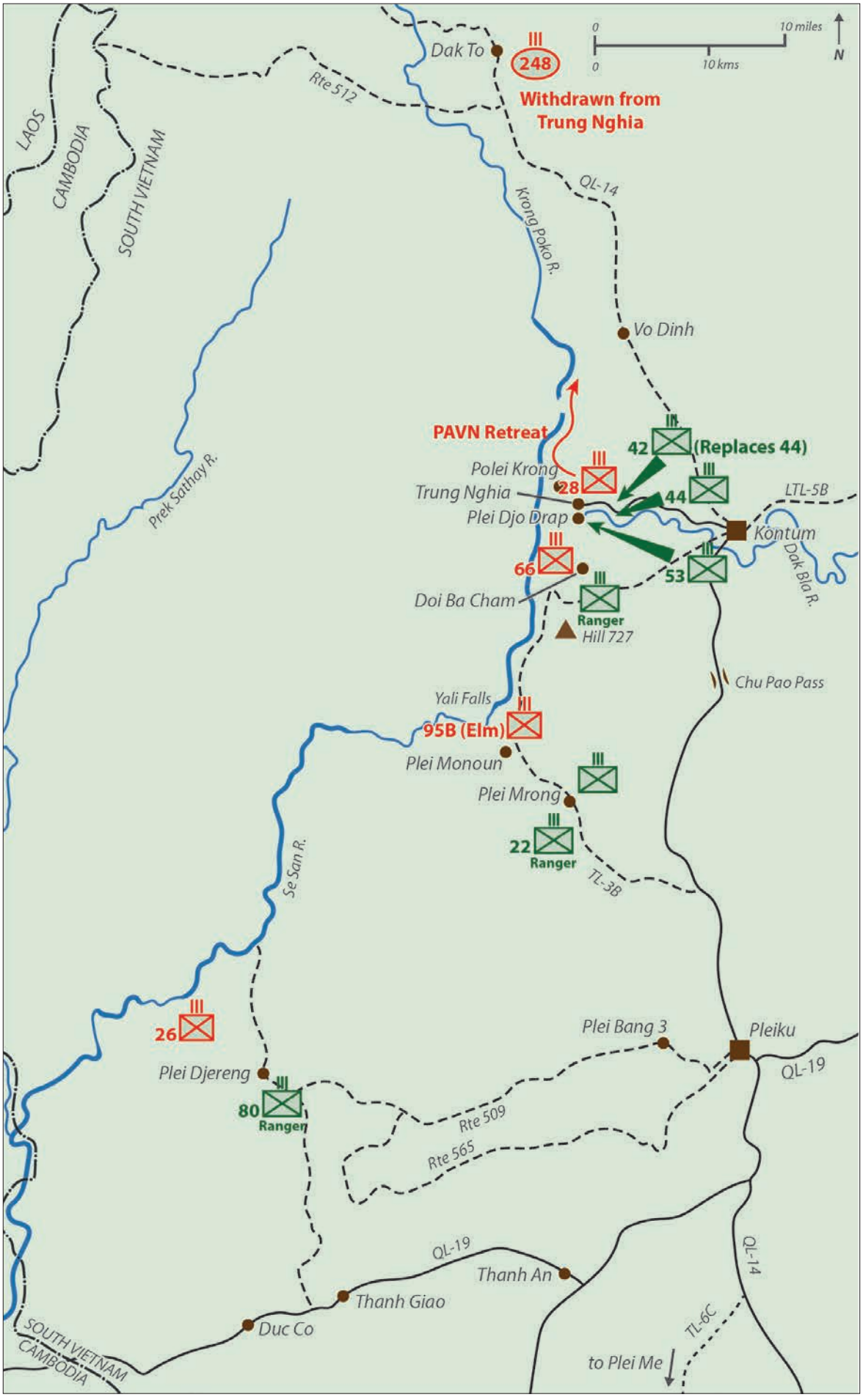


ARVN II Corps - Military Region 2, the military balance, January 1973.

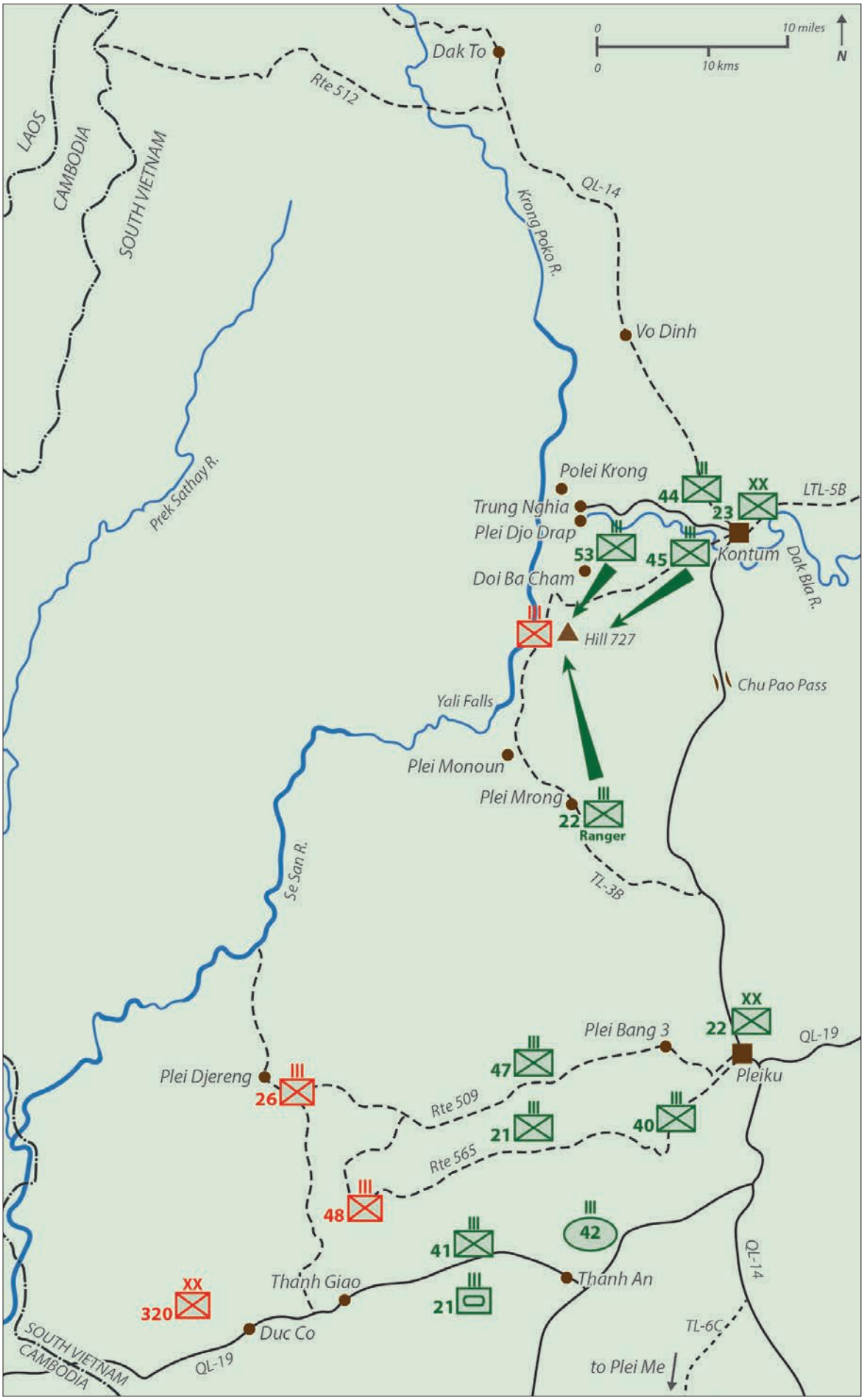


ARVN III Corps– Military Region 3, the military balance, January 1973.

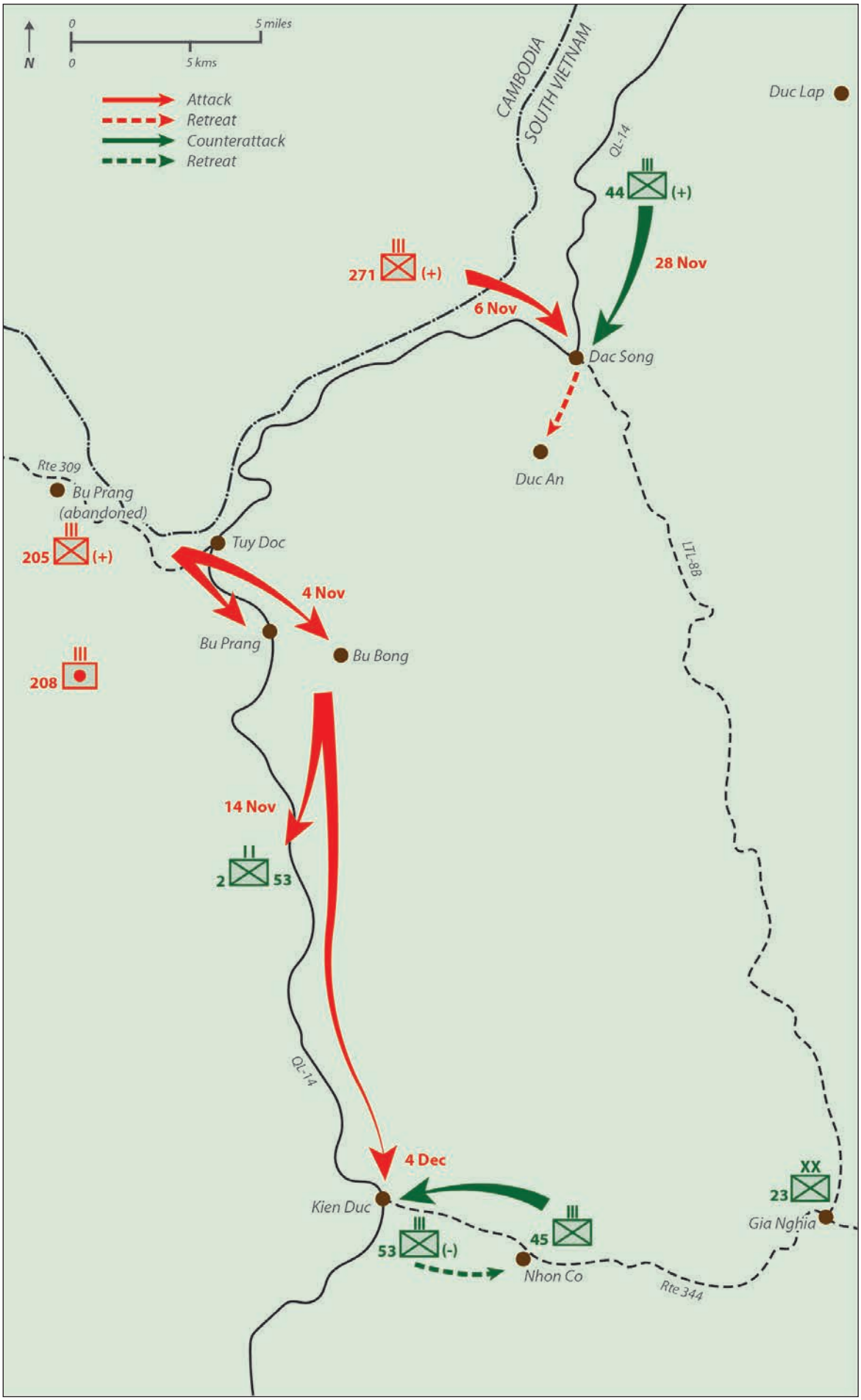
ARVN IV Corps - Military Region 4, the military balance, January 1973.



The Central Highlands, August - September 1973.



Central Highlands October 1973.



Quand Duc Campaign October - December 1973.

Army General Van Tien Dung succeeded General Vo Nguyen Giap as head of the PAVN in early 1974 and continued its modernization. Like Giap, he favored the development of the Armored Corps to be the cornerstone of the upcoming campaign to conquer South Vietnam. He is seen here visiting an armored unit, posing on an ISU-122 SP gun. (PAVN)

One of the lessons from the 1972 campaign was the poor combined-arms coordination of the PAVN operations, particularly between tanks and infantry. The North Vietnamese now made great efforts to organize numerous training sessions, from battalion to army corps levels, during the period 1973–74. (PAVN)

An SU-100 tank destroyer is seen during one of the numerous combined-arms training exercises in 1973. (PAVN)

Maintenance Depot modified some 40 T-34 tanks into AA SP vehicles by replacing their original turrets with an open platform where twin 37mm AA guns or an S-60 57mm AA gun were installed. It also modified the retired SU-76 SP guns into AA SP tanks by installing twin ZU-23-2 23mm AA guns or a 37mm AA tube on them. Nearly all the BTR-50s and BTR-152s also received twin 14.5mm or 23mm AA guns that came in addition to the BTR-40As with their twin 14.5mm guns to serve in a dual reconnaissance – APC and AA SP vehicles.

During 1972, the PAVN units on the fields consistently showed weaknesses in large combined-arms operations. Thorough analysis of each setback had always been how the PAVN leadership learned from mistakes and progressed. The North Vietnamese high command was developed into a competent outfit, able to adapt to each new circumstance. A special study commission was created in early 1973 by the Armor Command to recommend improvements and organizational changes. It was found that tank–infantry cooperation was poor and resulted in heavy armor losses because of the inexperience in mechanized operations of most of the senior officers. Many of them ignored the performances and capabilities of the vehicles under their command. On too many occasions the tanks were dispersed in company-sized units to support infantry probes, diluting their shock power. They were also sent with insufficient infantry and artillery support into urbanized areas where they suffered badly. Many officers could not cope with the rhythm of sustained mechanized operations, suspending an attack to assess and regroup instead of exploiting the breakthroughs brought in by the armors. They were often developing a too-rigid plan and strictly adhering to it even if the tactical situation had radically changed. The infantry units lacked the required mobility to cope with the tanks. The logistics were also often badly planned to resupply on time the armors on the field. Each time, the ARVN could recuperate from its initial setbacks and counter-attacked. The air defense of the armored units was also often inadequate.

The commission recommended the creation of newly combined Strategic Army Corps (SAC), emphasizing mobility, firepower, and the ability to crush important ARVN units. Each corps would have three to four motorized infantry divisions, one anti-aircraft artillery division, one artillery brigade, one engineer brigade, and one armored brigade. The core of each powerful SAC would be its armor unit, brought up to a brigade size of five to six battalions with 150 tanks and APCs. The troops of the SACs would be thoroughly trained in combined-arms operations. Furthermore, the armored brigade commander would be the SAC's deputy commander, helping him plan the operations with concentrated forces and speed of execution. The subaltern levels of commands were encouraged to take the initiative and exploit any opportunities, which was a real departure from a traditionally rigid PAVN command system.

The 207th Armored Regiment was specially set up to develop the new doctrine and to train the cadre personnel. The unit created two demonstration groups: one equipped with T-54 tanks and the other with PT-76 and Type 63 amphibious light tanks. The trainees

The North Vietnamese now grouped their motorized division into combined-arms strategic army corps (SAC). The 1st SAC is seen here during a great rehearsal exercise at the end of 1973. The troops in the foreground carry 75mm recoilless guns on bamboo poles. (PAVN)

The newly created SAC necessitated wider coordination and communication between its different constituent units. Consequently, each SAC was reinforced by a signal regiment. These female radio operators are preparing for the closing parade at the end of the first widescale field exercise of the 1st SAC in March 1974. (PAVN)

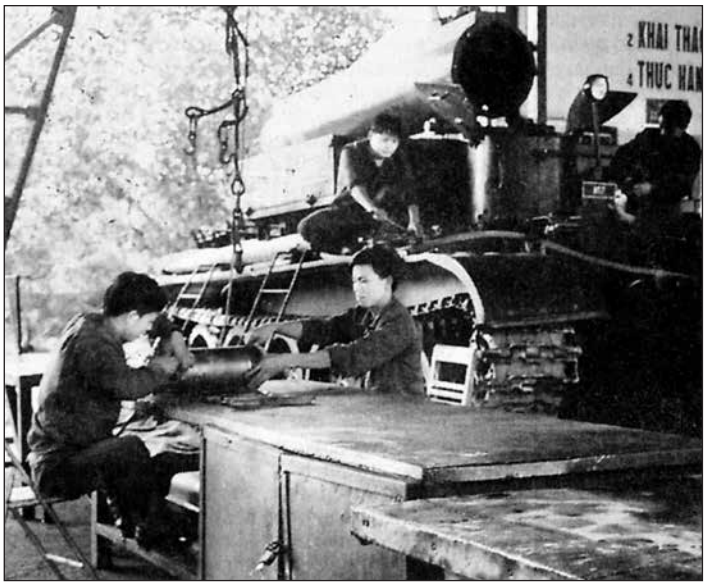
learned how to plan an armored attack, how to 'breach' the enemy frontline, and how to exploit it by carrying out a 'deep penetration' and a 'relentless pursuit'. On-the-job training saw trainees sent into the southern battlefields to plan and carry out small-scale operations. The armored battalion commanders were also encouraged to be more flexible in their planning by setting up combined-arms task forces depending on circumstances and available means. It was found that the best method was to amalgamate groups of six tanks and six APCs, with additional infantry on trucks, artillery and mobile AA batteries. The lessons learned with these small-scale operations were carefully analyzed and helped to refine the doctrine of use manual. Consideration was given to the attack of fortified positions and urban centers. Special exercises were carried out in this way by using former ARVN-captured bases such as at Ai Tu, Dong Ha, or Con Tien. A group of instructors was dispatched to the B2 Front to train staff and those of the COSVN on how to fully exploit the capabilities of the

To improve the mobility of the armored units, the PAVN deployed a higher number of specialized armor engineer vehicles such as this MTU-20 tank bridge layer. It has a twin-treadway superstructure mounted on a modified T-54 chassis that set up a 20m-long bridge. (PAVN)

Another specialized armor engineer vehicle was this SPK-5 seen during a training exercise. It was in fact a simple retrieval version of the T-34/85 tank, turret-less and equipped with a winch. (PAVN)

Armored Group 26. Combined-arms exercises were organized at Minh Hoa and Bu Dop. Teams of the Armor Command Inspectorate toured various units to supervise the execution of the new tactics.

In addition to the efforts to rebuild the tank corps, all the PAVN branches were being brought up to full combat capacity, thanks not only to Soviet and Chinese equipment deliveries but also by recycling damaged equipment and producing others locally. All the units were ordered to conduct a general inventory of property and organize the retrieval, collection, and repair of equipment. An agency responsible for directing the provision of technical support and for defense equipment production, the General Technical Department, was created in April 1974. It was placed under the command of General Dinh Duc Thien, who was also head of the General Rear Services Department that supervised the whole PAVN logistics. Efforts were also made to repair, adapt, and improve captured enemy equipment that was channeled to the shops of the ordnance department, the military equipment department, and the vehicle administration department. The military factories were also ordered to increase their production of light-infantry weapons, mines, explosives, and ammunitions. The Artillery Command then established several collection teams to retrieve damaged artillery pieces from the battlefields and bring them back to North Vietnam for repair. To increase on-site repair capabilities, the General Technical Department



A more sophisticated tank retrieval vehicle in service with the PAVN was the BTS-4. Based on a turret-less T-54 tank chassis, it was equipped with a hoist, a small folding crane with a capacity of 3,000kg, and a snorkel for fording rivers. (PAVN)

The VPAF was essentially an air defense force even if some of its MiG-17 and MiG-21 units were trained in ground attack missions beginning in 1973. The force also deployed a small number of Il-28 light bombers. These pilots are in discussion in front of a row of Shenyang J-6s (the Chinese version of the MiG-19) of the 935th Fighter Regiment at Kep AB. (VPAF)

sent to South Vietnam 200 vehicles and machinery repair stations; 21 small-arms and artillery repair stations; and 13 mobile teams capable of repairing armored vehicles and anti-aircraft artillery pieces. Some 15,000 technical personnel and mechanics operated in the south, allowing low-level repairs to weapons and combat equipment. By the end of 1973 the PAVN units' operational capabilities had substantially improved, allowing the first strategic army corps to be set up.

The 1st SAC was created in October in North Vietnam and was considered the elite strategic reserve, to be engaged to make a decisive blow. It was followed by the 2nd SAC, created in the Thua Thien Province in South Vietnam in May 1974, and the 301st Army Corps attached to the COSVN in July 1974, later renamed 4th SAC. Training for these corps was organized, with the emphasis on attacking large enemy forces and enemy-held cities. In 1974 the units held many staff and command-level exercises at corps and division levels to practice combat tactics. The 1st SAC held 380 training sessions, and the 2nd SAC sent its staff officers to visit the 324th Division, which was conducting combat operations in the ARVN I Corps area. The 1st and 2nd SAC trained more than 40,000 command-level cadres at various levels of command. To wind up the 1974 training year, the general staff directed the 1st SAC to conduct widescale field exercises involving an offensive campaign aimed at liberating a large city, then countering the enemy counterattacks. The exercise field was the city of Thanh Hoa and involved both elements of the PAVN but also the North Vietnamese Air Force and navy. Emphasis was placed on the use of the armor and the sapper. A newly raised 126th Naval Infantry Regiment was also involved. The sapper – Dac Cong branch had been reorganized and expanded. It had four mobile battalions, some parachute-drop trained, directly subordinated to the Sapper Command plus regiment and battalions assigned throughout the battlefields in the south. So the COSVN had at its disposal six regiments, including one regiment and 13 sapper-commando groups deployed around Saigon. The Central Highlands area had one sapper regiment made up of five battalions. MR 5 had five mobile sapper battalions and five battalions targeting enemy bases in Da Nang, Quy Nhon, Nha Trang, and Cam Ranh. The Tri-Thien Military Theater had three sapper battalions and three separate companies specially assigned to attack enemy forces and installations on the outskirt of Hue City and the Phu Bai military base.

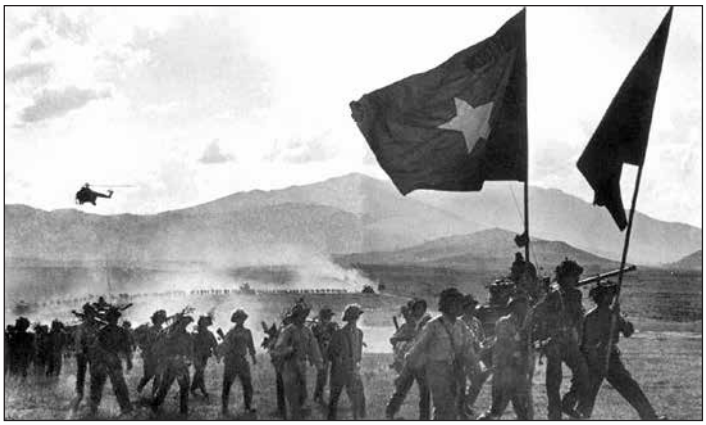
The new kind of mechanized warfare necessitated an expansion of the engineer branch, which included several new road-building and river-crossing regiments to ensure the mobility of the large combined-arms units. The high command's engineer reserve force consisted of five bridge-building and river-crossing regiments equipped with specialized Soviet vehicles and mobile bridges that gave them the edge over the ARVN, which lacked such equipment. The engineer forces attached to the different fronts were expanded into regiment and brigade levels.

The Air Defense Command, now an impressive force of more than 8,000 guns (14.5mm to 100mm), 300 radars, and 360 SAM sites, organized into nine anti-aircraft artillery divisions and numerous independent regiments and battalions of regular and militia forces, had made North Vietnam's airspace one of the best protected in the world. It was ordered to move part of its assets into South Vietnam to protect the deployed PAVN forces. In March 1975 some 23 anti-aircraft artillery regiments, with about 1,500 tubes, and two SAM regiments, with 48 S-75 (SAM-2) launchers, had been deployed in the south.

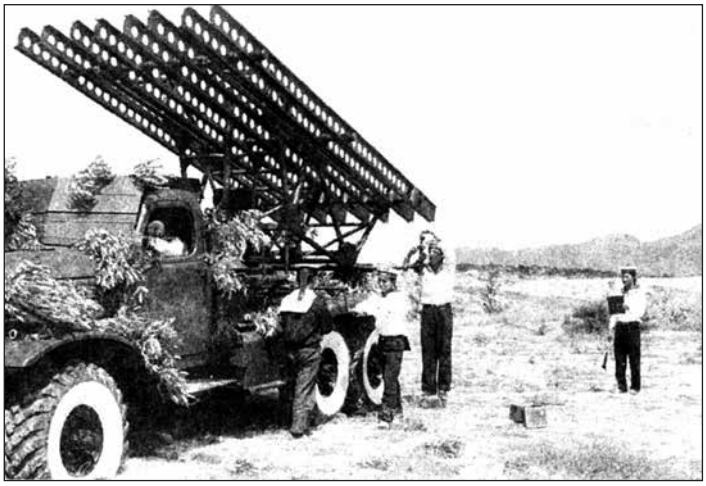
The Vietnam People's Air Force (VPAF) was a small but competent air defense force of about 10,000 men. Its pilots had inflicted substantial losses to the US air units attacking North Vietnam during the previous decade. It was organized into four fighter regiments (MiG-17, MiG-19, and MiG-21), one bomber squadron (Il-28), one transport (brigade-sized) regiment, and one training regiment. The VPAF had about 210 fighters, 10 bombers, 66 transports, 44 helicopters, and 30 trainers. Departing from its air defense doctrine, two fighter regiments on MiG-17s and MiG-21s had begun ground attack training in 1973. They had participated in the combined-arms exercises of the newly established SAC.

The small PAVN navy had about 3,000 men, used only in limited close-in security of territorial waters. It deployed four boats regiments with about 45 ships, including small freighters, P-4 torpedo boats, Swatow and Shanghai class gunboats and Komar guided missile boats armed with Styx missiles. Several naval infantry units and four water sapper commando teams were also activated. Apart from some supply missions to the south, the PAVN navy was not a factor in the balance of warfare.

Contrary to the fragmented South Vietnamese command structures, those of the North Vietnamese were a centralized and disciplined body strictly controlled by the communist party. The PAVN



The 1st SAC conducted a widescale field exercise aimed at attacking a large city, in March 1974. The exercise involved both elements of the PAVN but also the North Vietnamese Air Forces and navy. For the first time, the North Vietnamese ground forces were supported by MiG-17 and MiG-21 fighter-bombers and helicopters, such as the Mi-4 seen in this photo. (PAVN)



The 1st SAC widescale field exercise of March 1974 also saw the involvement of the 126th Naval Infantry Regiment. Some of its marines are seen here beside a BM-13 MLRS. Each launcher could fire salvos of sixteen 132mm rockets. (PAVN)

During the same filed exercise of the 1st SAC, some BTR-40As marked a pause to rejoice with local militiawomen. The armors were used in scouting missions and anti-aircraft vehicles, being armed with a twin ZPTU-2 14.5mm KPV heavy machine-gun. (PAVN)

The 1st SAC widescale field exercise of March 1974 also saw the deployment of S-75 SAMs (Sa-2 Guideline). Their role was to create a missile umbrella over the corps' operating area. Although lacking in mobility, their presence proved to be a strong deterrence to the VNAF interdiction attacks against the North Vietnamese lines of communications and rear-area depots. (PAVN)

chain of command was headed by the party-government military policy-making apparatus: the ministry of defense on the government side; the Political Bureau of the Vietnamese communist party Central Committee and the Central Military Commission (CMC) on the party side. The highest level of authority for military operations in the PAVN was the PAVN high command, an institution encompassing the office of the commander in chief and the chief of staff at the head of the Military General Staff Directorate, the equivalent of the ARVN JGS. The Military General Staff Directorate commanded the different subordinates' commands, such as the air force or navy, and the different directorates, such as the political or the logistical. Because of overlapping politburo and CMC membership, the CMC could be regarded as the ultimate power for all military matters. The dual-command system, military-party, was instituted at each hierarchical level through a system of political commissars.

With the failure of the Easter Offensive of 1972, General Vo Nguyen Giap had been forced to relinquish his post at the office of the commander in chief, replaced by Colonel General Van Tien Dung, his faithful deputy since the end of the 1940s. Dung was one of the few high-ranking North Vietnamese officers to have a proletarian background. His humble approach to the soldiers' problems made him enormously popular. However, as chairman of the CMC and defense minister, Giap still held considerable power and continued to shape the military policy of North Vietnam. He was the founder of the PAVN and its commander, gaining fame for winning over the French at the battle of Dien Bien Phu. Highly regarded as a famous guerrilla leader in the west, Giap was also a firm believer in developing

Introduced during the 1972 campaign, the 9M14 Malyutka ATGW (AT-3 Sagger) was the PAVN standard anti-tank missile. Wire-guided, it needed thorough training to be deployed properly. (PAVN)

the conventional capabilities of the PAVN. True to his theory of revolutionary warfare, he now assessed that the time had come for the 'general great counter-offensive' phase of the war with powerful conventional blows, coordinated with guerrilla operations at the rear of the enemy. For years, the role played by Giap in the final offensive against South Vietnam was minimized by the official Vietnamese communist historiography. Even if details remain sketchy, it seems that Giap had been progressively sidelined following the death of his mentor, Chairman Ho Chi Minh, in 1969 as he was opposed within the Politburo by supporters of General Secretary Le Duan. That led most western historians to assert that Giap played little or no role in the 1975 campaign, giving credit to Senior General Van Tien Dung, the PAVN commander in chief who arrived in the south in person to supervise the operations. Recent Vietnamese sources have rehabilitated him, notably by allowing the release of his book *My Years at the Command Post*, in which Giap detailed his role in the strategic planning of the final thrust to conquer Saigon.

But as in the ARVN ranks, the ceasefire announcement made many North Vietnamese soldiers genuinely believe that peace was finally coming and that they could return to their villages. For many, this would be the first time in years that they had seen their families since they traveled down the Ho Chi Minh Trail. There was also the problem of the released prisoners of war who, instead of being sent home, were sent to fill the ranks of the depleted units. Viet Cong morale was fluctuating, hit hardest by the progress of the South Vietnamese pacification campaign. Many had surrendered to the ARVN within the cadre of the Chieu Hoi (open arms) program. It took great effort from the PAVN Political Department to remobilize the troops. The political commissars toured the units to implement political indoctrination sessions; the most reluctant troops were segregated in re-education camps. The communists experienced a real morale problem in the weeks following the ceasefire, as was indicated by ARVN intelligence. However, the crisis was averted due to a combination of strict discipline and persuasion. Strict measures were also taken in North Vietnam to quell defective public sentiment. In fact, throughout the conflict the PAVN maintained a high degree of motivation and dedication among the troops. The political indoctrination emphasized less the communist ideals than patriotic sentiments. Hanoi's leadership had assimilated their struggle into the long national tradition of fighting against foreign occupation and the 'liberation' of the south as a national crusade. The political works permeated and colored all training and became second nature and a source of inspiration to soldiers. A system of political commissars closely paralleled each tactical command echelons.

CHAPTER 6
WEARING DOWN THE ARVN

On 13 June 1973, Henri Kissinger and Le Duc Tho met again in Paris and signed a new ceasefire agreement, known as Cease-Fire II, which did not stand more than a few hours. Whatever those public-relation efforts could bring, the communists clearly acknowledged that no political solution was in sight, the Viet Cong being too weak to really challenge the Saigon government by proselytizing and undermining the areas under its control. Because of its military losses and devastated economy, Hanoi concluded that it could not launch a new all-out offensive against the south for the foreseeable future. The military option was envisaged as being the only one to achieve the total 'liberation' of the south.

While their diplomats were sent to Paris to negotiate the peace, the North Vietnamese leadership met to review the situation. Part of the Politburo preferred to give top priority to the economic reconstruction of North Vietnam. Those partisans of this line of action were grouped around Truong Chinh, the number two of the Politburo and its ideolog. They argued that they could not now change the military situation, that the ARVN was still too strong to be defeated, and that the Soviet and Chinese military equipment deliveries were too limited: enough to rebuild the shattered PAVN but not to have a clear edge over the enemy. They were opposed by the communist party secretary general, Le Duan, and the president of the CMC and minister of defense, General Vo Nguyen Giap. Le Duan, a southerner, had since the early 1960s advocated the reunification by force of the country, leading to a direct confrontation with the US, and was supported by General Giap, the founder of the PAVN and who was its commander in chief until being moved aside, mainly because of Le Duan's supporters. However, profiting from Giap's powerful position as head of the CMC, Le Duan allied with him to push ahead a military solution to end the war and fulfill his life's dream of a reunified country. Both groups envisaged a complete military victory with Saigon as the ultimate prize. They differed only in terms of the tempo and the type of fighting. Truong Chinh was willing to revert to a long guerrilla warfare strategy to be developed in the south, then to advance step by step when circumstances would be more favorable. He was supported by the Chinese. Giap instead advocated a conventional invasion of South Vietnam by rebuilding his main force divisions, centered around the armored and motorized units. They should not wait, for a strategic opportunity was being developed since the departure of the last US troops. Furthermore, Washington seemed weary of being involved in South East Asia and would surely not send back its forces. But that window of opportunity would close if the North Vietnamese waited too long. Giap's views and those of Le Duan prevailed and the Politburo authorized the former to activate the 'Central Cell' in April

The ARVN Airborne Division were deployed to the I Corps area in May 1972 and remained until March 1975. It then lost its status of strategic national reserve, for withdrawing it from such a threatened sector would jeopardize the situation in the whole of the northern provinces of South Vietnam. These paratroopers await their flight back to Saigon for a period of rest in early 1973. At that point, C-123K transports were on the verge of being withdrawn from service before being reallocated to other South East Asian air forces. (Albert Grandolini collection).

In addition to the Airborne Division, the Marine Division was also now permanently attached to the I Corps, which left the ARVN with no strategic reserve available. These marines walk to their forward positions north of Quang Tri. (ARVN)

1973, a specially created headquarters, to prepare another offensive against the south. Giap placed the study group under the command of Lieutenant General Hoang Van Thai who planned to conquer South Vietnam within a two-year period, 1975–76, that could be expanded into 1977 if the ARVN resistance proved stiffer than anticipated. Giap presented the plan to the Politburo in September. He argued that the PAVN could compete favorably with a modernized ARVN, citing the recent defeat of the enemy's 21st Division in the lower Mekong Delta area as proof of the communist forces' recovery. In fact, these small skirmishes around Chuong Thien were exaggerated. But Giap won the day and the Politburo issued Resolution 21 on 4 October 1973, formalizing the full-scale resumption of hostilities.

In accordance with this strategy, the PAVN expanded its logistical

After the fierce fighting before and in the aftermath of the ceasefire, the front held by the marines was relatively quiet as neither the ARVN nor the PAVN wanted to alter the situation. There were, however, sporadic attacks against the marines' outposts, such as this one where the North Vietnamese used tear gas to confuse the defenders. (ARVN)

infrastructures, and shortened its logistical lines by starting a series of new routes on the eastern side of the Annamitic (Truong Song) mountain chain, on the South Vietnamese side, soon christened by the ARVN as the Ho Chi Minh Trail East, which ultimately would allow the rapid deployment of troops. The advancement and development of these logistical corridors led to more battles as the PAVN tried to eliminate the ARVN-controlled territories that hampered their route-opening efforts. The outposts that could threaten their storage areas were then targeted and eliminated. All this fighting took place in an increased tempo without the US reacting, leading the COSVN to issue Directive 934 indicating that "new opportunities afforded since, it was believed, and the United States had been forced to abandon its previous policies about Vietnam and would probably not intervene again militarily". The advancement of North Vietnamese engineering units from north to south is detailed sequentially from the ARVN I Corps–MR 1, just south of the DMZ, to the ARVN III Corps–MR 3.

Standstill fighting in I Corps

Of all the ARVN corps areas, I Corps–MR 1 experienced the lowest level of combat throughout 1973, apart from the surge during the North Vietnamese 'land grab' campaign before the ceasefire. The main concern for the I Corps commander, Lieutenant General Ngo Quang Truong, was only to prevent the North Vietnamese advancing inside his own lines of defenses. They contained several important economic and military installations, including Da Nang harbor, South Vietnam's second-largest city, and the ancient capital of Hue, a hugely symbolic cultural center. To defend this strategic area bordering North Vietnam, the ARVN dispatched, practically on a permanent basis, their only central reserve: the Marine and Airborne Divisions. They came in addition to the three divisions constituent to the corps.

The ARVN northern sector was held by the Marine Division, reinforced by the 51st Regiment of the 1st Division, six RF battalions and 12 PF companies under the command of Brigadier General Bui The Lan. The marines were also supported by the armors of the 18th ACS and an M48 tanks troop of the 20th Tank Squadron. If these forces were adequate to hold the frontline just north of Quang Tri city, they were not enough to push northward toward the North Vietnamese border. Each side seems to acknowledge this fact and apart from occasional artillery exchanges, the positions virtually did not change during the year. The relative calm in that sector allowed

On several occasions the North Vietnamese used tear gas to attack an enemy position. Their troops then wore the SCHM-41M gas mask for protection. (PAVN)

General Bui The Lan to relinquish the 51st Regiment to its parent division to reinforce the defenses of Hue, replacing it with a ranger group. The marines kept three battalions in reserve and could even rotate to Saigon for two-week periods of rest and family visits for the men. Consequently, the morale of the unit was the best among the whole armed forces. Taking advantage of this lull in the fighting in front of the marines, the PAVN brought back to North Vietnam their 308th, 312th, and 320B Divisions for reshuffling and training.

The area between Hue and Da Nang was defended by the Airborne Division, particularly the sensitive sector around the bridge across the Song Bo River at the mouth of the Song Bo Valley, less than 15km from the Imperial Capital, at the north-western gateway. If the ARVN defenses there crumbled, the Marine Division would be isolated further north. Throughout the year, the paratroopers held their ground, anchored on a series of hilltops. Even though the fighting was small in scale, it eroded the capabilities of that elite unit. Used as a fire brigade, sent continually from one battlefield to another, the paratroopers were bleeding white: from its deployment in MR 1 in May 1972 until January 1974, they suffered nearly 2,900 killed, 1,200 wounded, and 300 missing. For a unit whose organization called for only 13,500, these losses meant that the most experienced officers and soldiers had perished or were out of action. The replacements lacked experience and were not up to the same quality. Even among the paratroopers, the traditional strong esprit de corps was weakened.

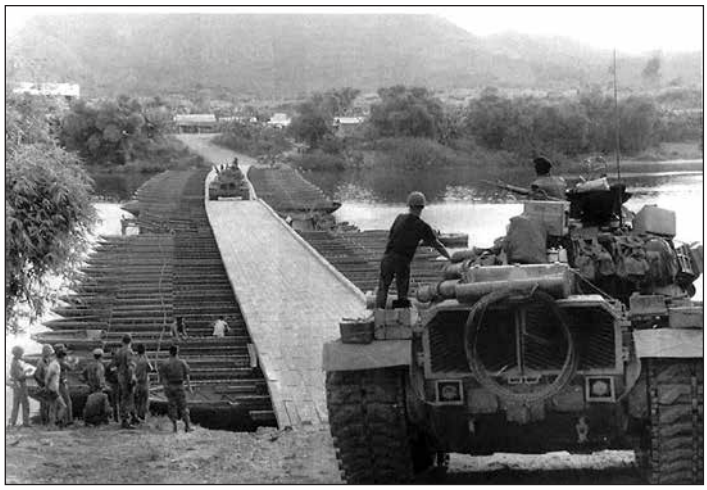
It was in this context that the Airborne Division was forced to abandon some of the outposts at the entrance of the Song Bo Valley when they were flooded, the whole area being hit hard by the typhoon Opal in October, which also washed away the bridge. When the paratroopers returned, they found the North Vietnamese deeply entrenched. The Airborne Division counter-attacked, supported by two RF battalions, a troop of M113s, and one of M48s, after the I Corps engineer had spanned the river with a Bailey bridge. After overcoming hard resistance, by early January 1974 it had reoccupied

The 1st Division, considered one of the best in the ARVN, was deployed to protect the crucial sector in the southwestern part of Hue. However, months of fighting to hold at bay the North Vietnamese from the ancient capital had wearied that elite unit. (ARVN)

The fighting in summer 1973 for the approaches to Hue came to a standstill when the area was hit by typhoons. Both sides saw its logistics greatly perturbed. (ARVN)

the lost positions in the Co Bi area.

But the pressure against Hue was also mounting in the south-western part of the city, held by the 1st ARVN Division. That unit was one of two ARVN 'heavy divisions', with four instead of three regiments. The other was the 22nd Division attached to the II Corps. The 1st Division was considered one of the best of the ARVN but months of heavy fighting for a series of fire bases situated on the fringe of the mountain crests overlooking Hue had inflicted heavy casualties and signs of weariness showed. Its 3rd Regiment was then engaged in defending the outposts along a tributary of the Song Bo River west of Hue in July and August 1973. The situation there stabilized after the 1st Division had taken back its 51st Regiment deployed north with the marines. The division's commander, Brigadier General Le Van Than, was replaced by Colonel Nguyen Van Diem, a dynamic and aggressive leader, but the situation did not improve significantly. Many issues were beyond his control, including inadequate supply to the forward outposts due to poor monsoonal weather, continuing typhoon washes, and limited air support. South of Hue, the 54th Regiment also encountered difficulties in maintaining its positions along the Song Ta Trach River and the Mo Tao Mountain where Route 1 crossed the Hai Van Pass. In fact, the highway could be easily interdicted at the numerous culverts and bridges when it paralleled the beach. In its



The Airborne Division had to fight a series of battles at the end of 1973 to protect the northwestern gateway to Hue. The ARVN engineer had put in a pontoon bridge over the Song Bo River to support one such counterattack with a platoon of Pattons from the 20th Tank Squadron in October. (ARVN)

southern defensive sector, in the Phu Loc District, the 54th Regiment was struggling to hold an edge over the 1,448m peak on the Bach Ma Mountain, a position that was finally taken by the enemy in October 1973. From there, the North Vietnamese could threaten Route 1 at will.

The area around Da Nang, particularly the southern flatlands approach, was adequately defended by the 3rd Division led by Brigadier General Nguyen Duy Hinh, one of the best ARVN divisional commanders. The unit was facing the PAVN 711th Division, which tried to push forward along the Thu Bon Valley. It was slowed by a series of ranger outposts. The fighting could be summed up by artillery duels and infantry probes. However, by the end of 1973 no fewer than five South Vietnamese district seats of the Quang Nam Province were within range of enemy 130mm guns, including Thuong Duc and Duc Duc.

Further south, the ARVN 2nd Division had the formidable task of securing the coastal piedmont and plains from the Binh Dinh province boundary to Tam Ky in the Quang Tin Province. Under the command of Brigadier General Tran Van Nhut, the division, reinforced by the local territorial forces and the 11th Ranger Group, secured the area and the main towns but were forced to carry out incessant sweeping raids to clear enemy infiltrations from the mountains redoubts overlooking Route 1, blowing up bridges with naval sapper commandos and attacking the refugees' resettlement villages. The Viet Cong guerrillas proved particularly active in small-scale ambushes and assassinations due to the weakness of the ARVN regional forces. One of the explanations was that many of the South Vietnamese people's self-defense forces had relatives in the communist ranks.

Even if the North Vietnamese had not drastically altered the frontlines in the ARVN I Corps–MR 1 area, they had reinforced their own positions and inflicted significant losses on the ARVN by the end of 1973. The South Vietnamese were now forced into a defensive posture, being unable to expand their own controlled zones. Behind solidly fortified positions, the PAVN continued its logistical build-up unabated, turning the area into one of their main depot hubs in the northern Quang Tri and western highlands provinces. These areas were in fact contiguous to the North Vietnamese territory and de facto already an extension of it. The North Vietnamese continued construction and stockpiling activities in full view of the ARVN positions and made little effort to camouflage. They moved in additional anti-aircraft units to protect them, including the 377th Anti-Aircraft Division, which had its 263rd SAM Regiment deploying several SAM-2 sites around Khe Sanh. The former famed US base had been rehabilitated and its runway extended to accommodate VPAF transports and helicopters. The city of Dong Ha, just at the range of ARVN artillery from Quang Tri, was being rebuilt and its small port was rapidly becoming a major storage and transhipment point for military supplies that channeled toward the Can La and A Shau valleys. The VNAF 1st Air Division in Da Nang had contemplated attacking these bases but its lack of electronic countermeasure equipment caused excessive losses to its A-37B and F-5A fighter-bombers. Losses, it was felt, that would not be replaced, contrary to US promises, as the facts would soon demonstrate. President Thieu himself gave instructions to minimize the aircraft losses, which resulted in attacks carried out at higher altitudes with less accuracy on ammunition deliveries. Only when ARVN troops were in contact with the enemy were the VNAF pilots authorized to fly lower to provide effective close-air support.

Sparring in the Highlands

If the fighting was relatively limited in the ARVN I Corps area, it escalated to a worrying level in the II Corps–MR 2 sector after the end of the Easter Offensive of the previous year. This area, the largest of the four South Vietnamese regions, included all the provinces of the Central Highlands and the long coastline from Binh Dinh Province south to the northern border of Binh Tuy Province, only 60 miles east of Saigon, and where were found some important towns and military installations such as Thuy Hoa, Nha Trang, the Cam Ranh Bay naval base, or Phan Rang, an important airbase. To control such a vast area, the II Corps commander, Major General Nguyen Van Toan, had at his disposal the 22nd and 23rd Divisions, five ranger groups, the 2nd Armored Brigade and the local territorial units.

The South Vietnamese held these areas firmly even if their hold over Binh Dinh Province was precarious due to the presence of the PAVN 3rd Division, which was entrenched on the overlooking mountain's redoubt. However, it was on the Central Highlands, particularly on its northern parts, that most of the fighting soon resumed. The ARVN 23rd Division, supported by territorials and rangers, was arrayed on an arc covering the north and northwest approaches of Kontum as well as the western flank of Pleiku. It also had to keep open Route 19 between these two cities. There was a deep but fragile arc of outposts manned by border ranger battalions and territorials extending north from Kontum at Mang Buc and Chuong Nghia. The western defenses were anchored on fire support bases (FSB) at Polei Krong

The PAVN 273rd Armored Regiment, created on 3 February 1973, was the main North Vietnamese armor unit in the Central Highlands area. Its T-54s, T-34/85s, and PT-76s were engaged on several occasions from March 1973 onward. (PAVN)

These regional force troops hold their positions west of Kontum, an area subjected to constant probes by the North Vietnamese. At this stage of the war, even the regional troops were armed with modern M16 rifles. (ARVN)

The journey to the Trung Nghia outpost in October 1973 was a dangerous undertaking due to the regular enemy interdiction of the route linking that last location and Kontum. Any communist advance down it was blocked by defensive positions reinforced by M41 tanks and M113 APCs. (ARVN)

This M48A3 of the 21st Tank Squadron is seen supporting an attack of the ARVN 23rd Division against the North Vietnamese 320th Division in the sector of Duc Co, along Route 19, in March 1973. The unit saw several of its tanks destroyed during clashes with the PAVN 273rd Armored Regiment. (ARVN)

and Trung Nghia, near the confluence of the Dak Bla and Krong Poko Rivers. Southwest of Kontum, on Three Points Mountain (Hill 700) overlooking Provincial Route 3B and the Dak Bla River, was the isolated outpost of Doi Ba Cham, accessible only by helicopters. The western approach to Pleiku was shielded by the isolated FSB Camp Le Minh near the Plei Djereng village. Most of these outposts were completely isolated behind enemy lines and could be resupplied only by air.

To expand its defensive perimeter in the northern sector, in March 1973 the 23rd Division drove along Route 19 toward Duc Co, a sector held by elements of the PAVN 320th Division supported by the 2nd Battalion of the 273rd Armored Regiment. The South Vietnamese task force, spearheaded by a troop of M48s of the 21st Tank Squadron, initially overcame a series of hilltop strong points reinforced with 85mm guns. But its advance stalled when it was counterattacked by 12 T-54s that knocked out three Pattons and several trucks. The South Vietnamese were forced to retreat under air cover. The VNAF claimed three enemy tanks before the front stabilized but the North Vietnamese tanks had overrun the isolated Chu Nghe outpost.

Despite the heavy losses suffered during the Easter Offensive of 1972, the PAVN B3 Front that oversaw all operations in the Central Highlands had recuperated enough by early May 1973. It ordered its 10th and 320th Divisions to exercise pressure west and northwest of Kontum, to push back the ARVN defensive positions that impeded the widening of a new logistics corridor. This new logistics route would link storages in the Dong Ha and Khe Sanh areas to southern depots in the Loc Ninh zone, north of Saigon. That resulted in heavy fighting when the ARVN reacted.

At the ceasefire date, the North Vietnamese were already deeply entrenched on the Polei Krong FSB that they used as a springboard to attack Kontum. The first attack was launched by the PAVN 10th Division, supported by the 40th Artillery Regiment, on the Chuong

In May 1973 the ARVN faced great pressure against the western defensive perimeter of Kontum when it was attacked by the North Vietnamese 10th and 320th Divisions. This ARVN M114 155mm howitzer battery responded in kind by laying suppressive fire on enemy approach axes. (ARVN)

During the fighting in the Chuong Nghia sector in spring 1973, the North Vietnamese heavily hit the ARVN positions with artillery. This M-46 130mm gun of the 40th Artillery Regiment is firing from a camouflaged position. (PAVN)

Two ATL artillery tractors of the PAVN 320th Division are being serviced at a depot area in Cambodia. That unit pulled back across the border when it was confronted by the whole ARVN 22nd Division airlifted by the VNAF into Pleiku in October 1973. (PAVN)

Nghia sector. Diversionary probes were at first carried out against the positions held by the ARVN 53rd Regiment, 23rd Division, northwest of Kontum against the FSBs Eo Gio, Hill N and R, and Doi Ba Cham at the end of May. All positions held but several South Vietnamese artillery batteries were heavily hit, being unable to counter-fire the longer-ranged 130mm guns. Another diversionary operation by the 95B Regiment, 10th Division, took place against the ranger base of

The ARVN II Corps sends an armored task force across the lines of communication of the PAVN 320th Division in October 1973 in the sector of Le Minh. But the North Vietnamese pulled back rather than face a superior force. These M41A3s of the 18th ACR are taking position beside a Montagnard village. (ARVN)

Plei Mrong, just south of the Yali Falls. The isolated rangers stood their ground for the moment.

The main attack was launched on 7 June by the PAVN 66th Regiment, 10th Division and the 24th Independent Regiment, supported by 10 T-54 tanks against Trung Nghia. The attack drove off a regional force battalion and elements of the 44th Regiment, 23rd Division from their outposts. Another assault, supported by six T-54s, overran the Ban Pech outpost, affording the North Vietnamese control of positions 17km west of Kontum.

Simultaneously, the PAVN 320th Division pressed hard against the ARVN defenses west of Pleiku and those protecting Route 14 north of the city. Vigorous counter-attacks by the South Vietnamese prevented any breaches in their perimeter. Then the 320th Division shifted its attention to the FSB Thanh Giao. The ARVN II Corps reacted by moving the 47th Regiment of the 22nd Division from the Binh Dinh coastal province to reinforce the defenses around the base that were now being probed aggressively by the 48th and 64th Regiments of the 320th Division. Thanh Giao held thanks to good air support. The VNAF A-1s and A-37s targeted the 320th Division's logistics and rear depots, destroying 34 buildings that housed supplies and ammunition as well as 13 medium ferries at a crossing on the Se Sang River, which formed the Cambodian border at this point.

The South Vietnamese tried to retake Trung Nghia but casualties mounted on both sides as successive attempts failed to dislodge the deeply entrenched enemy, who enjoyed the observation advantage from the heights of Ngoc Bay Mountain. In early July 1973 the 44th Regiment gained a few meters and dug in on the eastern edge of the village of Ngoc Bay but could move no further, despite using massive artillery preparations and air strikes.

Stalled in the attempt to take Trung Nghia by frontal assault, the II Corps commander, Major General Nguyen Van Toan, determined that an approach from the south against the positions at Plei Djo Drap, directly across the Dak Bla River from Trung Nghia, would strike the defenses in the flank and force a withdrawal. He directed the 23rd Division, reinforced with rangers, to attack north from the base at Plei Mrong.

The southwest monsoon, in full force over the western highlands of Pleiku and Kontum provinces in early August, allowed the PAVN to maneuver in daylight since aerial observation was spotty and artillery and air strikes consequently much less effective. Plei Mrong and its

In October 1973 the South Vietnamese tried to destroy the PAVN 320th Division southwest of Pleiku by acting fast, redeploying the entire ARVN 22nd Division by air. It would be the last time that the VNAF could fly such an effort before US budgetary cuts impaired its future airlift capabilities. A C-130A of the 435th Transport Squadron lands troops at the advanced base of Plei Blong 3. (Pham Quang Khiem)

camp, called Ly Thai Loi by the ARVN, was situated on Provincial Route 3B south of the Yali Falls of the Krong Bolah River and the enemy concentration around Plei Monoun. The ARVN move north saw increased fighting between 4 and 10 August when the PAVN 28th Sapper Battalion of the B3 Front launched seven attempts to take the camp, supported by 105mm and 130mm gunfire. The ARVN ranger units positioned north and south of the camp also came under attack. A few days later a battalion of the 95B Regiment, 10th PAVN Division, hit the ARVN 22nd Ranger Border Battalion at Doi Ba Cham, just north of Plei Mrong, but was repelled, leaving 150 dead.

Meanwhile, the ARVN 45th Regiment, 23rd Division, advancing in the Plei Monoun area to the Krong Bolah River, encountered other elements of the 95B Regiment. Combat with the 95B continued throughout the month in the Plei Mrong sector, and its losses were substantial, probably as many as 200. But despite these losses, the 95B prevented the ARVN from closing in on the Dak Bla River.

The North Vietnamese were nevertheless suffering from the bombardment at Trung Nghia. Damage to the 24B Regiment was so severe that it was withdrawn to the Dak To area for recuperation and replaced by elements of the 66th and 28th regiments, 10th Division. The 28th, recently strengthened by replacements from the north, took up the defense of Trung Nghia while the 66th held Plei Djo Drap. Meanwhile, the ARVN's tired 44th Regiment was replaced by the 42nd Regiment of the 22nd Division, flown to Kontum from Binh Dinh Province. This fresh regiment, and a small but important change in tactics, made the difference. Rather than engage in large infantry assaults, the 42nd methodically eliminated enemy bunkers one by one, using platoon-sized assaults supported by 81mm mortars firing delayed-fuse rounds that blew away overhead cover and killed or exposed the occupants. Prisoners of war later attested to the effectiveness of this technique, particularly the use of delayed fuses.

On 1 September 1973 the 42nd Regiment began the final assault on Trung Nghia, advancing cautiously to find that except for a few isolated riflemen, the enemy had withdrawn. The 28th PAVN Regiment, depleted by casualties and malaria, limped north along the Poko River. Some of its wounded, left behind and captured, revealed that forces defending Trung Nghia had suffered losses of 30 percent overall, and that in some units with considerable sickness the casualty rates were as high as 60 percent. On the other hand, the 42nd's casualties were light. Furthermore, the ARVN replacement system was working well and in mid-September the two divisions, the 22nd and the 23rd, were at about 90 percent and 85 percent strength, respectively.

While the 42nd Regiment entered Trung Nghia, the 53rd Regiment, 23rd ARVN Division, advanced along the south bank of the Dak Bla River and occupied Plei Djo Drap, vacated by the withdrawing 66th PAVN Regiment, which crossed the river to recuperate. Trung Nghia was cleared of all enemies by 7 September 1973, and the 42nd entered Polei Krong on 16 September. During the rest of the month, mopping-up operations cleared enemy remnants from the slopes of Ngoc Bay Mountain, and skirmishes between the ARVN rangers and elements of the PAVN 95B Regiment continued around Plei Mrong. But as the success of the 42nd Regiment transformed gloom and frustration into euphoria at South Vietnam's II Corps headquarters, a major blow fell on Plei Djereng.

One of the few impediments to the steady projection of the PAVN's logistical corridor down the length of the western highlands of South Vietnam was an ARVN camp at Plei Djereng, FSB Le Minh, manned by the 80th Ranger Border Battalion. The position, situated astride Route 613 and blocking free movement from communist-controlled Plei Trap Valley into the PAVN logistical base at Duc Co and east to

A C-7B of the 429th Transport Squadron makes a quick turn-around stop, engines still running, to unload bags of rice for the ARVN 22nd Division on an improvised airstrip southwest of Pleiku. This STOL aircraft was well suited for this kind of operation. (Albert Grandolini collection)

Pleiku, was an obvious enemy objective.

There was ample warning of an impending attack, including a North Vietnamese master sergeant from a reconnaissance company who turned himself in to Thanh An District, Pleiku, on 16 September and said that the PAVN 26th Regiment of the B3 Front would attack Plei Djereng before the end of September. That confirmed other information collected.

Armed with this intelligence, the battalion commander at Le Minh intensified his security operations around the camp. On 22 September only one company was inside the camp perimeter together with several families belonging to the battalion; the other two were patrolling outside the wire, although they did not range far from the camp. About noon the 26th PAVN Regiment began an assault using a heavy artillery bombardment that included 122mm and 130mm guns, mortars, and rockets and accompanied by T-54 tanks. As the battle raged through the afternoon, radio contact with the camp was lost and the battalion commander was mortally wounded. Rain and poor visibility prevented VNAF support. No reinforcement was attempted by the Corps commander, although two teams of Loi Ho rangers (long-range reconnaissance patrols) were transported by helicopters into the battle area to re-establish communications and attempt to rally the defenders. In the face of overwhelming North Vietnamese strength, this mission had no chance of success. The rangers reported seeing six T-54 tanks, and VNAF pilots after the attack counted 10 and destroyed three. But this was two days later; rain and poor visibility prevented the VNAF from providing support during the attack. Of 293 men in the 80th Ranger Border Battalion when the battle began, 200 were killed or captured in this short, violent action.

Until the attack on Le Minh, the corps commander, Major General Nguyen Van Toan, had enjoyed a deserved reputation as a forceful, if not brilliant, field commander. President Thieu, visiting Pleiku on 1 October along with chief of the Joint General Staff, General Cao Van Vien, to commemorate the 16th anniversary of II Corps, harshly rebuked General Toan for not reacting to the warning of the attack and taking steps to reinforce or at least provide adequate artillery support to the defenders. For General Toan, who some observers felt would be awarded his third star on the president's visit, the reprimand was indeed a shattering experience. Although Toan eventually became a lieutenant general and used his forces with considerable skill during his remaining time in command, of far greater significance than the blow to his ego was the possibility that his lapse at FSB Le Minh, as viewed by President Thieu, may have started a decline of confidence in his ability that culminated in his relief 11 months later.

In any event, General Toan seemed to recover rapidly and immediately proposed a plan to retake FSB Le Minh. However, his subsequent actions revealed that he was less interested in Le Minh than in destroying the PAVN 320th Division. President Thieu had directed him to use whatever means necessary to prevent the enemy from concentrating and seriously threatening South Vietnamese forces or territory in MR 2. General Toan, with some justification, considered

This C-119G of the 720th Squadron is seen unloading supplies for the ARVN 22nd Division at the Pleiku airbase. (Nguyen Tran Duc collection)

the other North Vietnamese division in the highlands, the 10th, less than a major menace, having recently experienced heavy casualties in the fighting around Trung Nghia. He therefore concentrated on the 320th Division, which he believed would be capable of major offensive operations by early 1974, if not crippled in the meantime.

His plan, which he started implementing in early October 1973, involved building and occupying strong points along Provincial Route 509 from Pleiku west to FSB Le Minh as bait to entice the 320th into concentrating in the open terrain where Toan could destroy its battalions with air and artillery. He built another strong position where a road used by the PAVN into Base Area 701 crossed Provincial Route 6C about 10km north of and within artillery supporting range of FSB Plei Me. The position was in relatively open, rolling brush land, and General Toan, whose background was armor, manned it with a task force consisting of a squadron of tanks and a cavalry squadron, a force of 70 M41 and M48 tanks and 65 M113s, reinforced by a four-gun battery of 155mm howitzers, and a regional force battalion, hoping that the 320th would accept the challenge to its line of communications. Instead, the 320th Division kept the pressure on Thanh An District, along Highway 19, and against the ARVN outposts west of Pleiku along Provincial Route 509. Attacks by fire were frequent and heavy, but little ground changed hands. Worst, behind the screen of the 320th, the PAVN 470th Logistical Group moved in from Cambodia and set up its headquarters in Duc Co.

By mid-October, General Toan changed his plans and directed that operations in Binh Dinh Province be turned over to the province chief and that only one regiment of the 22nd Division, the 40th, remain in the coastal province. The commander of the 22nd, Brigadier General Phan Dinh Niem, who had been wounded more than a dozen times in his long career in battle, had moved his command post to Thanh An District, Pleiku. His 47th Regiment was west of Pleiku with the 21st Ranger Group advancing in the direction of Plei Djereng on Provincial Route 509. At the end of October, even the 40th Regiment was airlifted into Pleiku and assigned to operate west of the city, generally along Provincial Route 565. The 41st Regiment, with the 21st Tank Squadron, was moving on Highway 19 toward Thanh Giao; the 42nd Regiment, following its victory at Trung Nghia, was in reserve.

The 23rd Division was still responsible for operations in Kontum Province and had its 44th Regiment, supported by territorials, securing the northwestern approaches to the city, while the 45th and 53rd regiments were closing in on Hill 727 west of Kontum City, the last major lodgment of the enemy east of the Krong Bolah River. At the same time the 22nd Ranger Group was advancing on Hill 727 from Plei Mrong. So although the victory at Trung Nghia had restored some relative stability to the sector northwest of Kontum and had reduced the threat to the ARVN artillery, logistical bases, and air bases around the city, the situation in western Pleiku Province was far from settled. Pleiku airbase and artillery fire bases in the province had been rocketed, and the 320th Division was responding to General Toan's extension of outposts along Provincial Route 509 by moving out from its Plei Djereng base to force their contraction. To exploit this perceived new opportunity to put the 320th out of action, General Toan had the entire 22nd Division airlifted by the VNAF C-7s, C-119s, and C-130s to Pleiku. It would be the last time that the South Vietnamese were able to redeploy an entire division by air.

While elements of the 48th Regiment, 320th Division, harassed the ARVN advanced base at Plei Blong 3, near Pleiku, the 2nd Battalion of the ARVN 40th Regiment fought fiercely against an enemy battalion, supported by five T-54 tanks, southwest of Plei Blong 3 on the afternoon of 23 October. Losses were heavy on both sides. Although other bloody skirmishes followed, none presented General Toan with the opportunities for even gradual attrition such as he enjoyed at Trung Nghia against the PAVN 10th Division. In western Pleiku Province, the 320th Division had room for maneuver and was not committed to defending a small piece of terrain as the 10th Division was at Trung Nghia. The decision to give up the offensive and pull back to defensible positions in a shallow strip west of Pleiku was, however, forced upon General Toan by the turn of events in Quang Duc where a North Vietnamese division-sized unit suddenly appeared.

Quang Duc, the mountain province where Vietnam bends westward and the Annamite Range slopes down to the terrace of the Dong Nai, was important commercially for its vast timber resources, and militarily for both sides because of the lines of communication that passed through it. After the North Vietnamese had closed surface travel from Saigon to Phuoc Long by the direct route through Binh Duong, the only land access available to the South Vietnamese was via Ban Me Thuot and Quang Duc. As far as the PAVN was concerned, Quang Duc was pivotal to the extension of its Route 14 out of Mondol Kiri Province, Cambodia, and Darlac Province, South Vietnam.

Because the South Vietnamese forces controlled Highway 14 as far south and west from Ban Me Thuot as the Tuy Duc crossroads, the PAVN's new route had to pass through Cambodia and re-enter South Vietnam in that salient of Mondol Kiri Province that juts into Quang Duc near a place called Bu Prang. The site of an abandoned US Army special forces camp, Bu Prang and its short runway perched atop a high, forested ridge astride National Highway 14 near the Tuy Duc crossroads at the Cambodian border. Before reaching the Phuoc Long border of South Vietnam's MR 3, Highway 14 was joined at the little hill town of Kien Duc by Local Route 344, coming over from the Quang Duc Province capital of Ghia Nghia. This road junction was vital because its control provided an alternate route from Ban Me Thuot, through Dak Song and Ghia Nghia on Provincial Route 8B. Important too was the road junction at Dak Song, where Provincial Route 8B left Highway 14.

Until mid-May 1973 when the PAVN's projection of its new line of communication reached Bu Prang and while South Vietnam's access to Phuoc Long through Quang Duc remained unthreatened, neither side paid much attention to Quang Duc. ARVN engineers were working on local roads, mainly to improve access to the timber preserves in the northeast section of the province, and the only enemy activity was mining to harass and delay this project. Only three regional force battalions were in the province. They were supported by six 105mm howitzer platoons (12 guns), which had no occasion to fire since the ceasefire. Additionally, 27 popular force platoons were scattered about the province. These territorials were nearly all Montagnards, and the province population was 60 percent tribal.

In early May 1973, a regional force patrol, moving out from its lonely outpost near Bu Prang, encountered a North Vietnamese reconnaissance party and killed four. The rest of May and June were

A Bell UH-1H gunship takes off just after being refueled at an advanced airstrip southwest of Pleiku. It then supported the ARVN 22nd Division in its effort to catch the PAVN 320th Division. (Albert Grandolini collection)

quiet until enemy harassment of the RF positions around Bu Prang began in early July, evidently in response to the unusually aggressive patrolling ordered by Colonel Nguyen Hau Thien, Quang Duc's province chief. Mortar attacks, accompanied by some light infantry probes, continued through July, as did RF forays into the 'old' Bu Prang positions on the border west of the Tuy Duc crossroads. In the last week of August, Colonel Thien tried a reconnaissance in force with two RF battalions. Both met heavy resistance short of their objectives on the border and returned to camp. This inconclusive skirmishing took on an ominous note in early September when the first evidence appeared disclosing that the COSVN had sent two battalions of its 271st Regiment from southwest of Tay Ninh City up to Quang Duc. The presence of a North Vietnamese main force regiment was a new and dangerous development in Quang Duc. Colonel Thien asked for reinforcements and was given an RF battalion from Darlac Province. He complained about the poor performance of the Darlac battalion, and General Toan agreed to replace it with another battalion from Khanh Hoa. This gave Colonel Thien a force of four RF battalions, two of his own Quang Duc battalions, and two from Khanh Hoa. He positioned the entire force at the mutually supporting bases of Bu Prang and Bu Bong, each with a platoon of 105mm howitzers.

The PAVN 271st Independent Regiment had been roughly handled by the ARVN and VNAF in the early months of 1973 in marsh and rice lands along the Vam Co Dong River and the Cambodian border in Hau Nghia Province and southern Tay Ninh. The COSVN had pulled it back to Cambodia in April for reorganization and recuperation. Afterward, the regimental headquarters and two of its battalions, the 8th and 9th, were trucked to Bu Dop in northern Phuoc Long Province, and the other, the 7th, was sent to operate in Long An Province. Leaving Bu Dop, the 271st Regiment marched through Bu Gia Map and arrived northwest of Bu Prang in late August, ready to help defend the new line of communications and to deny the ARVN the use of Highway 14 in the border region. Successive attempts by the Quang Duc territorials failed to gain any ground west of the Tuy Duc crossroads, as the rest of Quang Duc Province remained relatively quiet.

Meanwhile, North Vietnamese preparations for the Quang Duc campaign continued. A task force headquarters, designated Unit 95, was established at Bu Dop in Phuoc Long Province, and the PAVN 205th Independent Regiment was assembled there for movement to Quang Duc. The 205th had been operating since the ceasefire in South

Facing a superior force, the PAVN 320th Division slipped back into its rear bases in Cambodia. These troops were moved away on GAZ-53 trucks. (PAVN)

Vietnam's MR 3, and before moving to Bu Dop it had been in northern Binh Duong Province east of the Michelin rubber plantation. Three more maneuver elements joined the task force at Bu Dop before its composition was complete: the 429th Sapper Regiment, the 46th Independent Battalion, and the 21B Tank Battalion from the COSVN 26th Armor Group, a depleted unit with the 3rd Company with only three Type 59s, four K-63s, and one M113, and the 6th Company with three Type 59s, two K-63s, and two BTR-50PKs. Artillery support was provided by the 208th Artillery Regiment, 69th Artillery Group of the COSVN, which had been operating in Binh Long. The anti-aircraft artillery, including 23mm AA guns, joined the force as well as a detachment equipped with SA-7 MANPAD missiles.

Unit 95 had reached division strength, but this was not yet realized at ARVN's II Corps headquarters. Given the meager defenses in Quang Duc, it was surprising that the North Vietnamese leadership committed a force of such overwhelming size. The fact that it did so reflected the inadequacy of PAVN tactical intelligence, which had been demonstrated on several occasions, and a respect for the ARVN capabilities. Such a commitment also underscored the importance attached to the principal objective: the construction and protection of the lines of communication. Much later, after the major engagements were over and the communist leadership considered the threat to its logistics routes significantly diminished, the South Vietnamese intelligence officers discovered that continued offensive operations by the enemy's Quang Duc task force were designed to draw the ARVN into the province and keep them occupied, thereby reducing the forces available against the B3 Front. Had the forces been available, General Toan might have accommodated the enemy. They were not, however, and the security of Quang Duc had to revert to territorials and rangers.

By the end of September 1973, the reconnaissance and survey parties from the 208th Artillery Regiment had selected firing positions and observation posts near the Tuy Duc crossroads at Bu Prang, Bu Bong, and Kien Duc. Firing batteries moved into Quang Duc by the end of October with their 85mm and 122mm field guns and 120mm mortars. The PAVN 205th Regiment, with the 429th Sapper Regiment attached, arrived in assembly areas near Bu Prang in mid-October, and on 23 October the 208th Artillery began a five-day rehearsal preparatory to the attack. Meanwhile, the PAVN 271st Regiment with the 46th Battalion moved toward Dak Song.

The North Vietnamese artillery softened up Bu Prang and Bu Bong on 30 October. Each day, 122mm rockets, mortar, and artillery shells fell on the two camps. The camp commander kept

ARVN troops climb a hill during the Quang Duc campaign. They had to fight a series of sharp engagements on difficult terrain. (ARVN)

his four RF battalions outside the perimeter, patrolling near the Tuy Duc crossroads, and local defense of the two positions was the responsibility of an RF company, an engineer platoon, and the two platoons of artillery. The attack began just before dawn on 4 November 1973. The PAVN 205th Regiment, with the 429th Sappers and two armored companies, overran the badly outnumbered and outgunned defenders. They destroyed two ARVN howitzers, towed the other two away, and outside the camps dispersed the four RF battalions. During the assault on Bu Bong, the commander of the PAVN 205th Regiment was seriously wounded and had to be evacuated.

General Toan responded rapidly to the situation in Quang Duc Province, although he had only sketchy information concerning the enemy's strength. He immediately ordered the ARVN 23rd Division to pull the 53rd Regiment out of western Kontum and get it started toward Ban Me Thuot. They were reinforced with two ranger battalions and the 18th ACS and 21st Tank Squadron. As this order was being executed, a blow fell on Dak Song, the camp controlling access to Route 8B, the only land access to Quang Duc from Ban Me Thuot. The defenses at Dak Song crumbled under assault from the PAVN 271st Regiment and Gia Nghia, the province capital, was cut off. But the ARVN 53rd Regiment was on the way; by 8 November its 1st Battalion was approaching Dak Song. Its 2nd Battalion was flown in by helicopters into Nhon Co airfield west of Gia Nghia and moved north on Highway 14 toward Bu Prang and Bu Bong.

Meanwhile, the PAVN 205th Regiment executed the next phase of its orders: it turned over the defense of the newly won positions

These M113 APCs of the task force established by the ARVN 23rd Division are seen pushing against dug-in enemy positions in Gia Nghia in November 1973 during the Quang Duc campaign. (ARVN)

at Bu Prang and Bu Bong to another element of the task force and deployed south generally along Highway 14 from Bu Prang toward the Doan Van Bridge. Furthermore, countering the threat of the ARVN armors, the 21B Tank Battalion was reinforced by two companies of 12 T-54s each. Dispatched south of Bu Prang, the 205th Regiment had its first taste of battle with the ARVN regulars from the 23rd Division. In the early morning of 14 November, its 3rd Battalion with a platoon of tanks punched into the defensive perimeter of the ARVN 2nd Battalion, 53rd Infantry. The 2nd held, knocked out two T-54s, and captured nine crew-served weapons and 27 automatic rifles. The enemy left 100 dead on the field. A second attack was repulsed the next day with moderate losses to the enemy. The 3rd Battalion, PAVN 205th Regiment, had to be withdrawn; only 100 effective soldiers remained in the ranks.

Despite these serious losses, the 205th Regiment continued its advance south toward Kien Duc. With only the 2nd and 3rd battalions available (the 1st was still engaged near Dak Song), the ARVN 53rd Regiment prepared to defend the Kien Duc road junction. The North Vietnamese probed these defenses on 21 November. They then spread leaflets around Kien Duc, signed by the commander in chief, national liberation front forces, advising ARVN officers and men to stop trying to retake Bu Prang, Bu Bong, and Dak Song and threatening to attack Gia Nghia City with tanks if the South Vietnamese persisted. While skirmishing increased, General Toan continued to send reinforcements to Quang Duc. The 21st Ranger Group and the 44th and 45th regiments of the 23rd Division began their redeployment; most of the units were flown in by helicopters and C-7 Caribous. Meanwhile, the 22nd ARVN Division was pulled back from western Pleiku to assume the defense of Kontum, vacated by the departing 23rd Division. On 28 November the 44th Regiment, a battalion of rangers, and the 18th Armored Cavalry Squadron attacked Dak Song, forcing the withdrawal of the reinforced PAVN 271st Regiment, which pulled back toward Duc An, leaving blocking elements on Route 8B.

Its preparation completed, the PAVN 205th Regiment, reinforced with the 429th Sapper Regiment and supported by tanks and the 208th Artillery Regiment, attacked the Kien Duc road junction on 4 December 1973, wounding the regimental commander and forcing the elements of the ARVN 53rd Regiment to withdraw 6km east to Nhon Co airfield. The VNAF reacted vigorously and destroyed six North Vietnamese tanks. Casualties were moderately heavy on both sides: the 53rd had 40 killed, 40 wounded, and 80 missing. The PAVN had more than 100 killed who were replaced by fresh troops, lately arrived from North Vietnam, on 8 December.

General Toan flew to Saigon to report on the Quang Duc situation

An M41A3 of the ARVN 18th ACS advances along Route 14 during fighting in the Quang Duc Province. It was part of an armored task force that included the Pattons of the 21st Tank Squadron that supported the 23rd Division. (ARVN)

to President Thieu. The president told him not to be concerned about lost outposts, but to direct his efforts toward the destruction of the North Vietnamese forces in Quang Duc. These instructions no doubt pleased Toan. That same day he ordered the 23rd Division commander to put his command post in Gia Nghia and to fly his 45th Regiment to Nhon Co. Within hours, the first elements of the regiment landed at Nhon Co in six C-130As, although the airfield was under intermittent artillery and rocket attack. That night and the next day, the 21st Ranger Group, with the support of Patton tanks, removed the last road blocks on Route 8B south of Dak Song. Casualties were heavy, but the first convoy since September soon rolled into Gia Nghia from Ban Me Thuot.

Although the commander of the 53rd Regiment had recovered from his wound and asked for the mission of retaking Kien Duc, Colonel Tuong, commanding the division, assigned the task to the 45th. This regiment was fresh, whereas the 53rd's battalions had been in nearly constant action for a month. Following an intense and effective artillery and air preparation, the 23rd Division Reconnaissance Company and the 3rd Battalion, 45th Regiment, led the attack into the trenches, bunkers, and rubble at the Kien Duc road junction. The PAVN 205th was forced to retire with heavy losses; its 1st Battalion lost 40 percent of its strength, and its sapper company was so decimated that it was disbanded after the battle. A prisoner later reported that the 205th lost more than 200 killed and 400 wounded in its Quang Duc campaign.

The ARVN 23rd Division, using its 44th Regiment, continued effective operations during December and early January, mainly in the Bu Prang–Bu Bong area, against the PAVN 271st Regiment's forces remaining there. With the route again secured from Ban Me Thuot through Gia Nghia to Phuoc Long, General Toan's responsibilities in the northern highlands and Binh Dinh demanded that the 23rd Division leave Quang Duc Province to deal with more pressing threats.

In Quang Duc, the North Vietnamese exploited the benefits of prolonged and detailed preparation and capitalized on its ability to concentrate overwhelming force against lightly defended objectives. Although these factors combined to produce success in the initial battles, the ARVN, skillfully using its newly developed capability of

PAVN Unit 95, a division-sized force, was finally defeated while attempting to cut routes 14 and 8B in the southwestern sector of the ARVN II Corps in December 1973. However, the convoys that continued to supply Phuoc Long from Ban Me Thuot still needed to be heavily escorted due to occasional ambushes. (ARVN)

rapid air deployment, its professional application of close air support and artillery fire, and its experienced regular infantry, won the campaign. The PAVN was denied the use of Route 14 through Quang Duc, its line of communications in the border region around the Tuy Duc crossroads remained subject to harassment and interdiction, and the ARVN could regain and keep control of the logistical route to Phuoc Long. Quang Duc proved once again that the South Vietnamese, provided with sufficient ammunition, fuel, and maintenance support, could overcome the North Vietnamese in conventional operations, defeating soundly a division-strength force.

Keeping pressure out of the Saigon area

The ARVN III Corps – MR 3, commanded by Lieutenant General Nguyen Van Minh, contained not only the seat of the government of South Vietnam, Saigon, and its financial and commercial center but also all the most important operational, logistical, and training bases of the armed forces. The Joint General Staff (JGS) was in a compound next to Tan Son Nhut airbase on the northwestern edge of the city of Saigon. Tan Son Nhut itself was the hub of international and domestic air traffic, the headquarters of the Vietnamese Air Force and the 5th Air Division, and the home base of the ARVN Airborne Division. Most seaborne commerce steamed through the ship channels of the Rung Sat south of Saigon and passed through the city's docks on the Saigon River. The headquarters of the Vietnamese Navy was also on the Saigon River, near the major military terminal, Newport, and the largest petroleum storage terminal in the country was a few miles south of Saigon, also on the river, at Nha Be. Major military training installations were the Quang Trung National Training Center, just north of Saigon, the Thu Duc Training Center, site of the infantry and armor schools until they were moved to Bear Cat, near Bien Hoa, and the Marine Corp Center at Di An, north of Saigon. The ARVN arsenal was also on the northern edge of the city. Northeast, across the broad Dong Nai River, was the sprawling military complex of Bien Hoa – Long Binh. A modern four-lane highway and the national railway linked Saigon with Bien Hoa. At Bien Hoa were the logistical headquarters of the South Vietnamese Air Force and the 3rd Air Division, which contained, except for one squadron at Da Nang, the entire F-5 force. Long Binh, the former logistical center of the US Army in Vietnam, housed the 1st ARVN Associated Depot and later the Command and General Staff College.

The flat rice-lands of the Mekong Delta lay a few miles west of

The North Vietnamese slowly rebuilt their armored force in the ARVN MR 3 area after the ceasefire. The local 26th Armored Group had been nearly destroyed during the heavy fighting at An Loc during the 1972 campaign. These BTR-60PBs were part of the first reinforcements sent in from North Vietnam and are seen here in Loc Ninh. (PAVN)

One of the main tasks of the ARVN III Corps was to widen the defensive perimeter of Saigon, particularly in the northern and northwestern sectors. The most important task was to stop the North Vietnamese putting their artillery, such as this M-46 130mm gun, out of range of South Vietnam's capital and the main cities in the area. (PAVN)

Saigon's city limits with the rice-rich province of Long An to the south. The brush lands of southern Tay Ninh and Binh Duong provinces started only 25km north of the city and gave way to the vast jungle of the Dong Nai Terrace, which stretched to the Cambodian border. Saigon was the focus of five first-class national highways. Route 1 came from Phnom Penh and traversed Svay Rieng Province before entering Vietnam in Tay Ninh Province west of Go Dau Ha. It then passed through Saigon and continued through Bien Hoa and Xuan Loc on its way up the coast. Three major north and northeast routes began in or north of the city. Route 13, sometimes called the Thunder Road for the many ambushes that had taken place along its jungled length, ran north through Lai Khe and An Loc and crossed into Cambodia

Keeping open the corridor linking Saigon to Tay Ninh along Route 22 was one of the main tasks of the ARVN III Corps. These M113s of the 10th ACS rest beside a Cao Dai temple, Tay Ninh being the centerpiece of this religious sect. (ARVN)

For political reasons, the South Vietnamese were forced to sustain a series of isolated outposts, resupplied only by air. One of the most publicized was FSB Tong Le Chon, besieged for more than a year. The defense of the 92nd Ranger Battalion there was legendary. A VNAF Huey helicopter is seen here evacuating a wounded ranger, an undertaking that at the end became impossible due to heavy enemy anti-aircraft fire. (VNAF)

In early 1973 the North Vietnamese again closed Route 13 south of An Loc, isolating the city. That forced the ARVN to launch repeated clearing operations between Chon Thanh, Lai Khe, and Phu Gio. These M-41s of the 1st ACS, attached to the ARVN 5th Division, advance cautiously with rangers during an operation against the PAVN 7th Division. (ARVN)

north of Loc Ninh. Route 1A branched off Route 13 in Phu Cuong, about 20km north of Saigon, crossed the Song Be River, and climbed through the jungles of War Zone D to Don Luan where it joined Route 14, which continued to Ban Me Thuot and points north, but left MR 3 at the Quang Duc border.

One of the most secure major roads in Vietnam was Route 20, which left Route 1 east of Bien Hoa and reached Dalat, 230km by air from Tan Son Nhut. When Route 1 was interdicted, Route 20 was a good alternate route to Nha Trang. Another secure route and perhaps the most heavily traveled in the country was Route 4 to the Mekong Delta. It was vital to Saigon's rice supply, and its several major bridges and thousands of culverts required constant vigilance against sabotage.

The first part of 1973 was relatively quiet in the ARVN III Corps–MR 3. The North Vietnamese there were still recuperating from the fighting of the previous year and the land grab campaign before the ceasefire. They were focused on rebuilding the strength of their forces and improving their logistics system. They built warehouses, workshops, roads, and anti-aircraft positions, receiving new weapons, combat vehicles, and replacements while assembling a logistical and training base that spread across the northern border of MR 3 from Bu Dop in Phuoc Long Province to Lo Go in Tay Ninh Province. The communists were also concentrating freshly arrived battalions of tanks, artillery, and anti-aircraft weapons, together with infantry replacements for the divisions that were protecting the build-up. By September 1973 most of the units placed under the command of the PAVN B2 front, which ran operations in the southern half of South Vietnam, had been reshuffled and prepared for renewed offensive operations. They were completed by the deployment of the 367th Sapper Group from the Phnom Penh area, Cambodia, to Tay Ninh for further employment in the Saigon area.

As in the other parts of the country, the ARVN efforts to keep

One of the tasks of the ARVN III Corps was to look over the vulnerable railway system, which was sabotaged and ambushed. These regional force troops drive armored Wickham trolleys ahead of a train. (US Army)

open lines of communication to beleaguered bases, interdict North Vietnamese logistical routes, and damage enemy base areas and the PAVN's response to these actions raised the level of combat in MR 3 by the end of summer 1973. The most significant action during this period in MR 3 took place along Route 1A between Song Be and Saigon. Continuing to isolate the Phuoc Long capital of Phuoc Binh, the PAVN troops used artillery, mortars, rockets, and ground attacks against all the ARVN posts and positions along the 75km stretch of road between Phu Giao and Song Be. They shelled the airfield at Song Be and attacked the Don Luan post, but the heaviest action took place south of the Phu Giao base as the PAVN 7th Division attempted to block the highway and blow the bridge over the Song Be River. The North Vietnamese intention was not only to deny the ARVN the use of the road and isolate the garrisons north of the bridge but also to screen the movement of artillery and supplies south from Bu Dop in northern Phuoc Long to forward combat bases in the dense forest north of Bien Hoa and Xuan Loc. In fact, the PAVN itself was using sections of Route 1A between Bu Dop and Phu Giao to move its artillery. To circumvent these interdiction efforts, the ARVN was forced to fight hard battles to keep Route 14 open at Quang Duc in southern MR 2.

The ARVN 5th Division was roughly handled by the PAVN 7th Division between Lai Khe and Phu Giao, and one result of the 5th's consistent failure was the relief of its commander and his replacement in November by Colonel Le Nguyen Vy. The 18th ARVN Division fared much better under the leadership of an aggressive commander, Brigadier General Le Minh Dao, and Route 1A was kept open as far as Phuoc Vinh. His armored task forces aggressively conducted forays into enemy-held zones. The 18th Division also saw action around

Another important task for the ARVN III Corps was to secure Route 4, perhaps the most heavily traveled in the country, linking Saigon to the Mekong Delta. It was vital to Saigon's rice supply. A supply convoy of M35 trucks drives from Saigon to Can Tho. (ARVN

Xuan Loc and in its southern sector of Phuoc Tuy, but nothing decisive was accomplished by either side.

In fact, the ARVN did not have enough strength to significantly alter the frontlines, being just able to maintain their positions to provide enough maneuver room for their own forces and putting the main cities of the area outside enemy artillery range. For political reasons, the South Vietnamese were forced to sustain a series of isolated outposts that consumed a great deal of air resources. The most publicized example was the defense of FSB Tong Le Chon. Situated alongside the Saigon River on the Tay Ninh – Binh Long Provinces border, Tong Le Chon had been under siege since the ceasefire that continued throughout 1973, and the 92nd Ranger Battalion's defense was legendary. But the cost was high. After a brief respite following the second ceasefire, shelling resumed, moderately enough at first but reaching crescendo proportions later in the year as the North Vietnamese added 120mm and 160mm heavy mortars and 122mm and 130mm howitzers and guns to the batteries. The anti-aircraft artillery, including 37mm and 57mm guns of the newly formed 377th Antiaircraft Artillery Division at Loc Ninh, made supply difficult and evacuation almost impossible.

The PAVN 200th Battalion, which had been used in local security missions in the Tay Ninh logistical area, was assigned to the infantry element of the North Vietnamese siege force. One of its platoon leaders rallied to the South Vietnamese side in September with interesting comments on the conduct of the operation. He said that in June the PAVN organized a company to collect parachuted supplies that fell outside the Tong Le Chon perimeter, which between April and June amounted to about 80 percent of all supplies dropped. After June, according to this defector, the VNAF techniques had improved to the point where only 10 percent of the drops were recoverable by the company. He asserted that an understanding had been reached between the ARVN rangers and the PAVN whereby the C-130s dropping supplies would not be fired upon so long as the company would not be opposed as it collected the supplies outside the perimeter. This assertion cannot be corroborated, but it fits the general character of the situation at Tong Le Chon. If there was a tacit withholding of fire against the C-130s at Tong Le Chon, it certainly did not apply to helicopters. Many attempts were made to fly helicopters into the place to evacuate casualties and land replacements. Between late October and the end of January 1974 some 20 helicopters attempted landings: only six landed and three of these were destroyed by fire upon landing. In the last week of December 1973 a CH-47A helicopter was

The VNAF carried out sustained air strikes against the North Vietnamese logistical build-up north and northwest of Saigon between October and December 1973. This F-5A of the 63rd Wing of Bien Hoa airbase is ready to depart for another mission, loaded with four Mk-83 750lb bombs. (USAF)

destroyed as it landed, the 13th helicopter hit by enemy fire on a Tong Le Chon mission during December 1973 alone. The casualties were nine killed and 36 wounded. Another Chinook crashed and burned in January, and as the anniversary of the ceasefire came and went, 12 seriously wounded soldiers of the 92nd Ranger Battalion remained in the beleaguered camp.

Why the North Vietnamese were so consistent in their attacks against FSB Tong Le Chon was the PAVN's overall strategy in the Tay Ninh area. It called for continuing pressure along lines of contact, preventing the South Vietnamese from probing too deeply into the logistical base area and undermining the fragile hold that the ARVN maintained on the vital corridor between Tay Ninh City and Saigon. This pressure was exerted from three directions and spilled over prominently into Hau Nghia Province through which the corridor passed into the northwestern suburbs of Saigon. From the Cambodian salient of Svay Rieng Province, called the Parrot's Beak, the PAVN forces probed ARVN outposts along the Vam Co Dong River. The river port of Go Dau Ha was under constant threat. Since the port was the junction of national routes 1 and 22, only 10km from the Cambodian border, its loss would sever Tay Ninh and isolate sizable South Vietnamese forces there.

The North Vietnamese prevented any ARVN forays toward its northern Tay Ninh logistics base area along local Route 4; this road led into the PAVN's growing headquarters, logistical, and political complex around Lo Go, Thien Ngon, Xa Mat, and Katum. Moving within range of the ARVN's 25th Division forward base at Tay Ninh airfield, the ARVN outpost and communications relay station on Nui Ba Den mountain, and the RF base at Soui Da, the North Vietnamese regularly harassed these positions with artillery, mortar, and rocket fire and made the resupply of Nui Ba Den hazardous by frequently directing anti-aircraft fire and SAM-7 MANPAD missiles at the VNAF helicopters.

The PAVN exerted strong pressure against the Tay Ninh–Saigon corridor from its forward combat bases along the Saigon River from the Michelin rubber plantation to the Ho Bo woods. The Ho Bo area was flat, almost featureless terrain, laced with trenches and tunnels, deeply pocked with ragged lines of bomb craters left by numberless waves of B-52 bombers, its shattered plantations overgrown with head-high weeds and dense brush. Nearly ten years of battle litter defaced the countryside, and a tangle of tank treadmarks gave it the appearance of an abandoned armored training ground. Hidden beneath were the bunkers and fighting positions of several North Vietnamese main force units, the principal occupant being the 101st Regiment. The 101st had entered the area in 1966 from North Vietnam and had been a constant resident of the Tay Ninh–Hau Nghia–Binh Duong region since its first punishing engagements with the US 1st Infantry Division that year. In the summer and fall of 1973, it was backing up local battalions harassing ARVN territorials and elements of the 25th Division north of routes 1 and 22.

The North Vietnamese increased their artillery attacks in summer 1973, targeting Khiem Hanh, a forward base protecting the northern approach to Go Dau Ha; Trang Bang, a principal town and defensive position astride Route 1 midway between Tay Ninh City and Saigon; Cu Chi, the main base of the ARVN 25th Division; and the defensive position at Trung Lap north of Route 1. To increase pressure against the ARVN, the PAVN also launched infantry and commando probes. Although a night rarely passed without attacks against these or smaller posts, major contact was infrequent. But in one major engagement in late September 1973, the 2nd Battalion, 49th Regiment, 25th Division was caught in a devastating ambush in a rubber plantation between Route 22 and Khiem Hahn. More than half the battalion were casualties, including 43 killed, and it lost nearly 150 weapons and 18 field radios. Shortly afterward some command changes were made in the 25th Division, including the division commander and the commanders of the 46th and 49th regiments. The road to recovery was long and slowly traveled for the 49th Regiment, whereas the 50th Regiment of the 25th Division enjoyed more successes than failures during the last half of 1973 in sweep operations around Phu Hoa, and in southeastern Binh Duong and Hau Nghia provinces.

In the only other major contact in the Tay Ninh–Saigon corridor up to the ceasefire anniversary, a Hau Nghia regional force battalion met a battalion of the PAVN 101st Regiment, reinforced by a local company, northeast of Trang Bang. When the battle was over, the Hau Nghia battalion, among the best RF units in MR 3, collected 32 enemy weapons on the battlefield and buried 56 North Vietnamese soldiers. The RF casualties were 19 killed and 33 wounded.

In the last half of 1973 in southern Binh Long and western Binh Duong provinces, very little combat took place. The North Vietnamese continued their build-up in the Minh Thanh plantation and the Lai Khe–Ben Cat area, shifting their artillery southward into the Long Nguyen area from where they increased the weight and frequency of attacks against the ARVN bases. But the only ground engagement of note took place in early January 1974 just west of Chon Thanh when the ARVN 2nd Battalion, 8th Regiment, 5th Division was struck hard by the PAVN 7th Battalion, 209th Regiment, 7th Division. Charged with blocking Route 13 and preventing any ARVN advance toward Minh Thanh, the 7th Battalion killed 36 ARVN soldiers in this engagement, wounded 26, and captured 85 weapons.

The PAVN tried to disrupt the VNAF air campaign against its logistical installations by rocketing Bien Hoa airbase on 6 November 1973, destroying three F-5As. (Albert Grandolini collection)

The South Vietnamese were anxious and frustrated over the communist build-up north of Saigon. Largely beyond reach of the ARVN artillery and protected by large and mobile North Vietnamese formations, the PAVN was openly building a modern, heavily fortified logistics and communications center. In late October 1973, President Thieu attacked this enemy complex with air strikes. Not a part of that air campaign, a single attack was already made in late October against Xa Mat in Tay Ninh Province, a small hamlet on the border with Cambodia that had been named as a "point of entry" in Article 4 of the Protocol to the Agreement Concerning the International Commission of Control and Supervision," but at which no ICCS team had been posted for the simple reason that the communists did not want their activities at Xa Mat observed. The town was heavily hit, with the destruction of the marketplace, a fuel dump, and about 60 buildings.

The concentrated air attacks did not begin until 7 November, and the South Vietnamese made it known that they were in response to the PAVN rocketing of Bien Hoa airbase on 6 November, where three F-5As were destroyed, an indication that they still felt obliged to rationalize offensive operations in terms of retaliation for communist ceasefire violations. The shelling had disturbed the current air operations of the day at Bien Hoa, which saw 33 fighter-bomber sorties against the PAVN concentrations around the ARVN base at Don Luan. MR 3 intelligence claimed the destruction of numerous fighting positions, about 100 enemy soldiers killed, and four secondary explosions.

From 7 November to 5 December 1973, the VNAF flew 800 sorties of fighter-bombers, including A-1s, F-5s, and A-37s, against the PAVN bases in Tay Ninh, Binh Long, and Phuoc Long provinces. It began with attacks against the Bo Duc and Loc Ninh areas. Although the results of the Bo Duc strike were not reported, MR 3 intelligence claimed good results against the Loc Ninh storage facilities, including fuel and anti-aircraft positions. However, to preserve their aircraft in such kinds of operations where no ARVN forces were in direct contact with the enemy, many attacks were made at medium altitude, above the ceiling of the anti-aircraft 37mm guns, thus lessening their accuracy. The VNAF commanders, under the constraints of US military assistance, knew that lost airplanes would not be replaced and damaged ones would be grounded for months awaiting repair. Of the strikes against Loc Ninh, on 30 November and 3 December, the pilots reported flak between 4,000 and 12,000 feet and the bomb-release altitudes were between 7,000 and 10,000 feet. Attempts by the JGS and MR 3 to assess the damage to the PAVN installations were frustrated by the limited VNAF aerial photographic capabilities, the remoteness of the areas attacked, and the dense foliage that concealed many targets. Agents filtered back with a few reports, and these were probably accurate as far as they went but were far from comprehensive; the VNAF attacks proved to have no lasting effect on the enemy's capabilities. The North Vietnamese retaliated with a sapper raid on the Shell petroleum storage site at Nha Be, the biggest of the country, on 2 December 1973, which virtually wiped it out. The communists also sent water-sapper teams into the South Vietnamese Navy docks near Saigon and sank six small craft. Just a few miles southwest of Saigon, on 15 December, they ambushed an unarmed US joint casualty resolution center team and killed a US Army captain, the first US serviceman to die by communist fire after the ceasefire. This incident effectively ended all efforts by US casualty resolution teams to enter areas not considered immune from enemy intrusion.

The North Vietnamese retaliated against the VNAF air offensive with a sapper raid on the Shell petroleum storage site at Nha Be, the biggest in South Vietnam, on 2 December 1973, virtually wiping it out. The daring raid was carried out by the PAVN 10th Assault Sapper Group, which infiltrated the heavily protected site. (VNAF)

The Mekong Delta rice war

South Vietnam's IV Corps–MR 4 contained 16 of the nation's 44 provinces, more than half of the cultivated land, most of which was devoted to rice, and more than half of the country's population. Whereas post-ceasefire fighting in the northern and central provinces of South Vietnam was over key terrain, the war in the Mekong Delta became a contest for the control of the numerous villages in the countryside and the fight to counter North Vietnamese and Viet Cong infiltrations. The area was also the rice basket of Vietnam and obtaining as much of the rice harvest as possible was the communists' key objective. Nearly 90 percent of communist rice requirements were in fact requisitioned in the Melong Delta.

The swampy terrain, segmented by numerous rivers and canals, made any mechanized operations difficult. Much of the tactical and logistical movement was by waterway, and many of the battles were fought for control of canals. Here, the South Vietnamese had the advantage of mobility, supported by the well-equipped Vietnamese Navy that patrolled the waterways with its shallow river crafts and

The Vietnamese Navy IV Coastal Zone covered the Mekong Delta area where the River Patrol Force operated most of its 14 river patrol groups. Each river patrol group was manned with patrol fast boats (PBRs), which had very high speeds, the capability to go into narrow creeks and shallow waters, and good maneuverability. The South Vietnamese operated 293 PBRs. (US Navy)

Used for coastal and inland water operations were a series of patrol boats, such as the HQ-230 *Nguyen Ngoc Long*, an LSSL landing ship support patrol boat, operating from Dong Tam naval base. It was armed with one 76mm, two twin 40mm, four single 20mm guns, and four .50 Cal MGs. Seven LSSLs were in service with Task Group I. After the fall of South Vietnam the HQ-230 escaped to the Philippines where it was pressed into service as the LF-49 *Sulu*. (Nguyen Ngoc Loan collection)

light fighting boats. The riverine operations were carried out by the 'brown-water' fleet, with 362 boats, operated impelled from 17 locations throughout the delta. However, this generally well-maintained fleet saw its performance impaired by poor coordination. After the departure of the US, with their command structures that had been reproduced for the South Vietnamese armed forces, President Thieu, for political reasons, had reasserted absolute control of the navy and VNAF assets by the corps commanders. This led to confusion with the duplication of several command channels. It also created resentments and acrimony between the different services. This state resulted in the navy in the Mekong Delta operating far below the level it should have been. Although the IV Corps commander, Major General Nguyen Vinh Nghi, as region commander, had all the authority he needed to direct coordinated operations involving all forces in the delta, by the time this authority filtered through the different navy and ARVN command channels, it had lost its force. The ARVN sector, sub-sector commanders, and commanders of tactical units exercised no authority over naval units and naval commanders consequently remained independent and aloof, often unwilling even to attend sector planning and briefing sessions.

With its maze of rivers and canals, the Mekong Delta was always a difficult area to control. The North Vietnamese used this labyrinth of mangroves and marshes to infiltrate guerrillas and collect rice. (PAVN)

The ARVN also used motorized rubber boats to inspect and control the numerous canals and creeks. (ARVN)

In addition to providing security on the major waterways, the Vietnamese Navy was also charged with patrolling the coastline to prevent enemy supply boats from entering. The blue-water navy in the delta operated from two major bases. The 4th Coastal Flotilla, with 26 patrol craft, was based at An Thoi on Phu Quoc Island, on the Gulf of Siam, and was responsible for coastal waters down to the border of An Xuyen Province. There, the 5th Coastal Flotilla assumed responsibility that extended around the Ca Mau Peninsula and northeast along the coast to the MR 3 boundary. The 5th Coastal Flotilla operated 27 patrol craft from Nam Can, a former $50 million US Navy base with excellent dry-dock facilities. But the blue-water navy had difficulties intercepting the enemy's supply craft sailing down the coast from Cambodia. Its boats were too deep of draft to follow suspicious sampans into the shallow inshore waters. Furthermore, the VNAF lacked the specialized maritime patrol aircraft, such as the P-2 Neptune or the P-3 Orion, which would help control the sea approaches.

For the South Vietnamese, the rice war meant that enemy lines of

The ARVN imposed a blockade on rice produced in the Mekong Delta, an area that both sides considered strategic on this field. These ARVN troops have captured this canoe in Kien Phong Province, which is full of rice intended to be smuggled into communist-controlled zones. (ARVN)

In summer 1973 the ARVN 44th Special Tactical Zone, with its principal forces consisting of the 7th Ranger Group, was ordered to drive out the PAVN 1st Division from the Seven Mountains area in the southwestern part of the Mekong Delta, next to the Cambodian border of An Giang Province. These rangers patrol the marshes surrounding the mountains, which were the highest of the Delta. (ARVN)

communication had to be interdicted to prevent the shipment of rice to delta base areas as well as to collection points in Cambodia where much of it was transhipped to communist units in South Vietnam's MRs 2 and 3. Intelligence efforts concentrated on rice requisitioning, transport, and storage. The J2 of the Joint General Staff had estimated that some 58,000 metric tons of rice had been collected in the delta during the 1972 harvest, and the object was to cut this drastically in 1973. For the communists, the rice war meant controlling more rice-producing hamlets, protecting the forays of rice-requisitioning parties, securing canals used to move rice boats, and preventing intrusions by the ARVN into the storage areas.

The South Vietnamese were motivated by more than the simple purpose of denying the enemy rice. Besides the obvious political imperative to reduce or at least limit the enemy's influence over the delta's population and resources, South Vietnam needed the rice to feed its own people and armed forces. By September 1973 a shortage of rice was developing in Saigon. An early season drought had disrupted planting, and shipments of delta rice for the year were 326,500 metric tons, considerably behind that of 465,500 metric tons in 1972. Floods had struck the coastal lowlands of the northern provinces of MRs 1 and 2, destroying much of the rice crop and stores.

The enemy's rice production in areas under its control in South Vietnam was negligible, and only forces north of the COSVN's domain were normally provided any rice from North Vietnam. Consequently, heavy demands were placed on Cambodian and Mekong Delta rice. All sizeable PAVN forces in Cambodia were sustained by Cambodian rice, and much of this rice was also delivered to the COSVN forces inside South Vietnam. The Cambodian Khmer Rouge rebel forces were experiencing shortages of their own and by the fall of 1973 were increasingly reluctant to allow the North Vietnamese to fill rice requisitions in Cambodia. Competition for rice resulted in armed clashes between the two communist allies and increased the importance of South Vietnam's Mekong Delta rice.

Since the defeat of Cambodia's 32nd Brigade at Phnom Penh in May 1973, the entire Cambodian–South Vietnamese border region from the Gulf of Thailand to the eastern edge of South Vietnam's Hong Ngu District in Kien Phong Province was controlled by the North Vietnamese and Khmer Rouge forces. The only Cambodian government presence was at Samma Leu, a small navy river station north of the border. The frontier area, in some places as deep as 35km into Cambodia, contained major PAVN supply routes and rear service centers. The two most significant were in the 0 Mountain complexes, opposite the Seven Mountains in South Vietnam's Chau Doc Province. One was the rear base of the PAVN 1st Division, the 195th Transportation Group, and the 200th Rear Service Group; the other was Base Area 704, which contained part of the PAVN 207th Regiment's supply area.

Near the 0 Mountain was the southern terminus of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, the beginning of the infiltration corridor 1-C serving the communist units throughout the southwestern delta and providing conduits for illegal commerce in rice and other commodities between South Vietnam's border provinces and the North Vietnamese-controlled Cambodian base areas. While markets flourished on the Cambodian side of the border trading contraband rice and other commodities with the PAVN forces, South Vietnam garrisoned its border by establishing blocks on the canals, rivers, and trails that crossed the frontier, and patrolled the region vigorously with ARVN and navy units. A major campaign also started in summer 1973 to destroy or force the PAVN 1st Division out of its redoubt in the Seven Mountains. That was carried out concurrently with a well-planned, though indifferently executed, rice blockade. As if this were not trouble enough for the Cambodian-based North Vietnamese units, the Khmer Rouge prohibited sales of Cambodian rice to them, creating a serious rice shortage.

Consequently, the COSVN directed that the required rice be requisitioned from South Vietnam's delta and that the blockade be broken. Armed units were to enter South Vietnamese-controlled areas and seize rice, transport it into secure caches, and ship it into Cambodia. The Viet Cong clandestine political cadres negotiated deals with South Vietnamese villagers by buying rice above the price market. For example, a kilogram of rice in South Vietnam brought 80 piasters in June and 180 in September; on the border, in the Viet Cong market at Ca Sach, a kilogram commanded 115 piasters in June and 250 in September. The price differential made it worth the risk to some smugglers and consequently drew significant amounts of rice across the border. According to estimates, at least 600 tons of rice was smuggled out of the delta each month, from August through October 1973, from the Tan Chau market across the Mekong and up the small canals that laced the swamp and paddy fields to the border. The scope of this smuggling operation depended on the complicity of local ARVN regional and popular forces, as well as on the Vietnamese Navy at Tan Chau. Reliable evidence indicated that some high-level officials were involved and profiting from the trade. Other routes

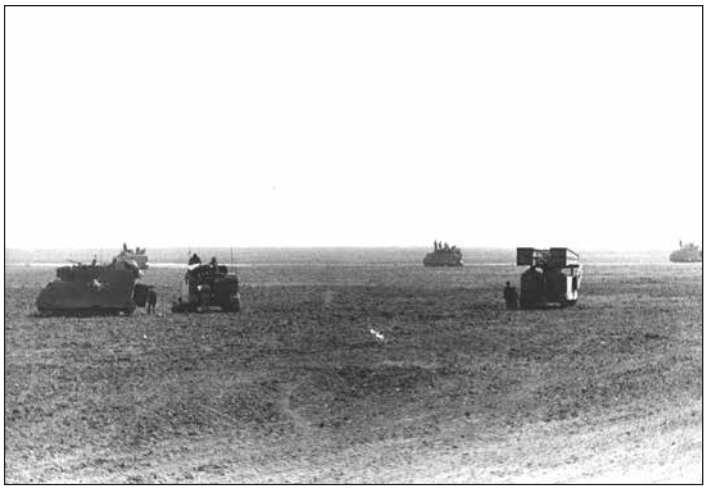
The drive against the PAVN 1st Division was supported by the ARVN 4th Armored Brigade. That was the only armored brigade that did not have tanks but only amphibious M113 APCs due to the swampy terrain in the Mekong Delta. (ARVN)

transported clandestine rice in the border area, but the Hong Ngu–Ca Sach arrangement was the largest.

Fears mounted in Saigon that communist rice-procuring would lead to runaway inflation in rice and other commodities. Orders went out from Saigon directing province chiefs to crack down on illegal trade and to tighten the blockade. The chiefs of Chau Doc, Kien Giang, and Kien Phong established restricted, controlled, and free-trade zones in each province. The entire border was designated a restricted zone, meaning that no commodity could cross legally. Parts of the Seven Mountains and the Tram Forest of western Ha Tien in Kien Giang Province were also declared restricted zones. Controlled zones were established, mainly in Hong Ngu District, in which citizens could legally possess only limited quantities of commodities. Except for a 5km radius around the district town itself, all of Hong Ngu was either restricted or controlled. Those parts of Chau Doc and Ha Tien provinces next to the Seven Mountains and the Tram Forest became controlled zones, and other parts were free-trade zones in which goods could move without restrictions.

The blockade was barely underway when MR 4, responding to the Saigon rice delivery plan, instituted far more stringent controls. The Saigon plan, aimed at preventing a rice shortage in the capital and the Central Highlands, made it illegal in the border provinces to move rice anywhere without permission, except for small amounts for family consumption. Any unauthorized movement, whether across the border or not, was grounds for arrest and confiscation.

Elements of all police and military forces were used in the reinforced blockade. The navy and marine police were responsible for stopping and searching all craft on major waterways. Airmobile operations, using helicopters, were conducted regularly against known Viet Cong marketplaces. To check on the entire operation, the IV Corps commander, General Nghi, assigned police from the MR 4 Special Branch to report directly to him on any corruption among local officials and units. There was no doubt that the reinforced blockade worsened the existing rice shortage among the enemy forces in Cambodia. Desertions increased in the communist ranks as men became more despondent and hungry. Prisoners tell of extremely austere diets and of little hope for relief. Although relatively ineffective in Hong Ngu, the ARVN blockade in the Seven Mountains of Chau Doc was very tight; the province chief gave it the highest priority and his personal attention. It was partly responsible for one of the most resounding South Vietnamese military victories of the post-ceasefire



A group of ARVN APCs during the campaign around the Seven Mountains. Several variants of the M113 can be seen here, including an M577 command post vehicle (left) and a bridge-layer vehicle (right). (ARVN)

period: the destruction of the PAVN 1st Division.

The attack to drive the PAVN 1st out of the Seven Mountains was launched in early July 1973 by the 44th Special Tactical Zone, where principal forces consisted of the 7th Ranger Group and the 4th Armor Brigade, the only ARVN armored brigade that did not have tanks but only M113 APCs due to the swampy nature of the terrain in the Mekong Delta. The Seven Mountains was a chain of rugged, forested, cave-pocked peaks that stretched 25km in a ragged line from the Cambodian border at Tinh Bien to below Tri Ton, a district headquarters in the shadow of Nui Co To, the southernmost peak in the chain. Although the tallest of the seven was only 700 feet, rising as they did from a featureless, often flooded plain, they were spectacular prominences and gave the impression of far greater size.

Just north of the border in the Seven Mountains, Nui O was one of the main bases of the PAVN 1st, which had moved there from battles around Phnom Penh in summer 1972. Establishing defenses as far south as Nui Co To, the 1st was mainly responsible for screening and protecting movement along infiltration corridor 1-C, which passed to the west of the mountains. Secondary tasks included protecting rice collection teams and harassing South Vietnamese military installations throughout the region. ARVN intelligence revealed that the PAVN 1st headquarters had been pulled out of the Nui O base and was now established in the Cambodian town of Kampong Trach, north of Ha Tien. Its 52nd Regiment was also operating in the same area, and the 101D Regiment and most of the 44th Sapper Regiment were in the border region south of Nui O. The North Vietnamese increased artillery harassment against the towns of Tinh Bien and Tri Ton in late July. The battalions from the PAVN 1st infiltrated Nui Giai and Nui Co To mountains during September. The 101D Regiment, which had received 300 replacements from North Vietnam in August, also moved into position on Nui Dai Mountain. The ARVN 44th Special Tactical Zone reacted with a concerted drive with the local territorial forces to dig them out. As the rangers, with up to 10 battalions operating, entered the mountain strongholds, the casualties mounted and the shelling of populated areas by the North Vietnamese continued. The ARVN IV Corps enveloped the area with armored task forces with the aim of not only reducing the threat to the surrounding districts but also breaking the North Vietnamese screen protecting infiltration corridor 1-C. Just as a stalemate seemed to have been reached, the casualties and the blockade weakened the PAVN 1st. The losses were such that the division was deactivated in October 1973. The records of one of the unit's captured hospitals recovered near Nui Dai disclosed that it had lost nearly 900 soldiers by 20 September.

After five months of protracted fighting, some 10 ARVN ranger battalions occupied the Seven Mountains redoubt. The PAVN 1st Division losses were such that the unit was deactivated in October 1973. (ARVN)

The 101D Regiment, which had only 300 men left, was consolidated by absorbing the 44th Sapper and 52nd regiments. The 101D then became a brigade, assumed control of the artillery and support units of the 1st, and operated directly under the PAVN B2 Front. By the end of October it withdrew from the Seven Mountains into its Cambodian sanctuary.

The Tri Phap campaign

After reducing the PAVN threat in the Seven Mountains area and closing infiltration corridor 1-C, the ARVN IV Corps now switched its efforts to expel the North Vietnamese presence in the strategic Dinh Tuong Province. With its bustling market capital of My Tho, it controlled the whole eastern Mekong Delta. Through My Tho passed Route 4 to Saigon, the Mekong River, and several large canals. One of the principal North Vietnamese infiltration routes, corridor 1-A, crossed the Cambodian border between Kien Phong and Kien Tuong provinces, traversed the maze of canals through the Plain of Reeds, and ended in the watery wasteland called the Tri Phap where the PAVN had set up Base Area 470. A branch of corridor 1-B from the 'Parrot's Beak' of the Cambodian Svay Rieng Province also entered the Tri Phap from the northeast. An insurgent communist base established since the war against the French, the Tri Phap was partly covered with brush, with little land suitable for cultivation, essentially being a swamp that over the years had been laced with permanent fortifications and hidden storage areas. No allied force had succeeded in occupying or inflicting serious damage to the installation in the Tri Phap. Immediately after the ceasefire, the ARVN units in Dinh Tuong were preoccupied with maintaining security in the central and northern reaches of the province and could not divert the forces necessary to clean out the Tri Phap, even though they were aware of increased enemy activity.

On 9 August, ARVN intelligence indicated that the PAVN Z-18 Regiment was moving into the Tri Phap area from the Cai Bay District, in northern Dinh Tuong Province, where it was replaced by the DT-1 Regiment. Simultaneously, the North Vietnamese launched attacks along Route 4, which continued through November, to gather as much of the harvest as possible and to disrupt ARVN efforts to send the rice through that highway to Saigon. But beyond that, the enemy objectives were to protect the installations in the Tri Phap, expand the base area there, and use the infiltration corridors from Cambodia without interference from the ARVN. Nevertheless, the South Vietnamese repulsed, with heavy losses to the enemy, numerous battalion-sized attacks against outposts and fire bases in the Cay Bay, Cai Be, and Sam Giang districts during July and August 1973. In the first week of September alone, enemy casualties in the region numbered 144

The North Vietnamese also disbanded their 6th Division, which had suffered heavy casualties. Its depleted regiments were reassigned to the PAVN MR 2, which infiltrated its battalions elsewhere in the Mekong Delta area where attacks increased markedly by the fall of 1973. (PAVN)

killed, and those of the ARVN were 17 killed and 78 wounded. Despite these losses, the North Vietnamese poured in reinforcements of their MR 2, which oversaw operations in the Mekong Delta, by engaging the Z-18, Z-15, E-24, and DT1 Regiments. The ARVN 7th Division, commanded by the spartan and austere Major General Nguyen Khoa Nam, in charge of the defense of the area of Dinh Tuong, reacted vigorously. He had become skillful in rapid deployment, in close coordination with artillery, naval, and air support, and by sending armored task forces along the infiltration corridors. The division then mauled the PAVN E-24 Regiment. The enemy responded by sending in replacements from its 207th Regiment. Many were intercepted while moving toward the Tri Phap area. As the year ended, however, the severe rationing of fuel drastically limited the division's mobility. General Nam withdrew some territorial outposts from exposed positions that balanced this disadvantage somewhat, in that he less frequently had to dispatch troops in what were often futile but costly attempts to rescue besieged positions. Instead, he could select areas of deployment more likely to result in combat with major units or large infiltrating groups. Using advantages of surprise, superior mobility, and firepower, including effective helicopter raids, the 7th Division was usually the clear winner in that kind of encounter. Going to the relief of outposts too often drew the relief force into an ambush in which all advantages lay with the enemy. By the year's end, the division still held firmly the vital Route 4 but could only disrupt occasionally the North Vietnamese build-up in their Tri Phap base area.

Encountering fierce resistance in the Tri Phap area, the North Vietnamese switched the weight of their attacks elsewhere in the Mekong Delta by the end of summer to disperse the ARVN forces. They disbanded their 6th Division that fall, and its depleted regiments were assigned to the PAVN MR 2, which infiltrated its battalions. The ARVN responded with a thorough reorganization of its IV Corps. Its three constituent divisions in the delta were reacting differently to the deteriorating situation in MR 4. True to their records of past performance and in concert with the nature of the leadership they received, they ranged from highly effective to consistently poor. Major changes in the 9th Division took place toward the end of the year. Its commander, Major General Tran Ba Di, was replaced by Brigadier General Huynh Van Lac. Of more immediate impact was the reorganization that drew all rangers out of IV Corps and eliminated the 44th Special Tactical Zone. This change required the 9th Division to assume responsibility for Chau Doc, northern Kien Giang, and the Kien Phong provinces. It turned over its two southern provinces of Vinh Long and Vinh Binh to the 7th Division, recovered

The ARVN IV Corps reacted vigorously to the surge of North Vietnamese attacks in the Mekong Delta by the fall of 1973. These South Vietnamese soldiers counterattack across a rice field in the Tri Phap sector. (ARVN)

its 14th Regiment, which had been under the operational control of the 7th, and released its 15th Regiment to the operational control of the ARVN 21st Division in Chuong Thien Province. With only two infantry regiments, General Lac replaced the equivalent of three ranger regiments in the northern districts of the border provinces. It was feasible only because the PAVN 1st in the area had been so severely damaged in the Hong Ngu and Chau Doc battles. The navy's role to interdict the PAVN's infiltration route through Kien Giang into Chuong Thien, derived from corridor 1-C, was also very successful. The brown-water navy was especially successful in intercepting enemy attempts to cross the Cai Lon River and its tributaries.

In June 1973 the 21st ARVN Division, which deservedly had the worst reputation for discipline and effectiveness in the Mekong Delta, was given a new commander, Brigadier General Le Van Hung, the hero of the siege of An Loc during the 1972 Easter Offensive. Although General Hung had nowhere to bring the division but up, progress was slow. He gradually replaced ineffective subordinates with combat-proven officers, many from airborne and ranger units, and observers noted slight improvements in morale and combat effectiveness. General Hung used the 15th Regiment, under his operational control from the 9th Division, exclusively in Long My District of Chuong Thien, and his three organic regiments, the 31st, 32nd, and 33rd, operated throughout the rest of Chuong Thien and northern An Xuyen provinces. The 32nd and 33rd had little contact with the enemy, other than receiving attacks by fire, but in late December 1973 the 3rd Battalion of the 31st Regiment was ambushed while marching to the relief of an RF outpost, and more than 100 of its men were killed. In fact, the North Vietnamese could infiltrate elements of the 95A, 18B, D-1, and D-2 regiments on the fringe of the Chuong Thien Province. They were adequately supported with weapons, ammunition, and replacements through the Kien Giang corridor, despite frequently successful ARVN operations near the Cambodian border against this logistical route. These events illustrated again the longstanding defects in leadership and training and supported the DAO's year-end assessment that the 21st Division was no more than "marginally combat effective."

The year ended in a flurry of communist activity throughout the delta. They had broken their units into small companies and platoons for harassing actions. Incidents of ground attacks and attacks by fire reached the highest level since the ceasefire. Losses were heavy on both sides, but no significant tactical changes were apparent. The ARVN joint operations center provided data on casualties in December that showed nearly 40 percent of all enemies killed during the last half of 1973 died in the delta. The burden of this fighting was carried out by the territorial forces. Because they were raised and stationed in their home provinces and districts, their numerical strength in each MR was largely a function of the local population. With a population of more than seven million, MR 4 was authorized nearly three times as many territorials as MR 1, and twice as many as were authorized MRs 2 and 3.

The RF soldiers in MR 4 were assigned to 144 battalions and 125 separate companies and were used by 18 sector tactical commands. But nearly all units were seriously understrength due to a combination combat losses, desertions, and ineffective recruiting. The desertion rate was accentuated by the harvest season, when soldiers traditionally returned home to help their families collect rice. Overall, the RF strength in the delta was less than 80 percent of authorized, and NCO strength was even lower. Although most of the battalions carried assigned strengths of 350–400 men, out of an authorized 561, some, such as those in Ba Xuyen and Chuong Thien provinces, were down to 300. With such a reduced assigned strength, as few as 150 soldiers were present for operations in a typical Chuong Thien battalion, a battalion smaller than a company. Understandably, as unit strengths declined, so did combat ability and morale. Remarkably, the territorials in a few sectors, notably Kien Tuong and Go Cong, maintained high assigned strengths, a reflection of inspired leadership. But overall desertions exceeded recruitments, and strengths continued their slow but steady erosion. Declining strengths influenced another debilitating situation. A well-intentioned unit training program for territorials had been devised by the ARVN central Training Command and ordered executed by the JGS, but the demands of combat on the depleted units made it progressively difficult for the more embattled of the sector commanders to release RF and PF units for training. Combat efficiency in the most active sectors thus declined still further. The only encouraging fact was that most of the deserters did not switch sides. In fact, the local Viet Cong units did not benefit from this high desertion rate, experiencing themselves a shortage of recruits to be compensated by troops coming from North Vietnam.

In early 1974, General Cao Van Vien, chief of the JGS, ordered the JGS to investigate, study, and report on the territorials of MR 4. The study revealed some interesting facts. During the first three months of 1974, MR 4 territorials lost 8,852 men killed, wounded, or missing during mobile operations away from fixed bases. In these engagements they accounted for 5,344 enemies killed or captured, a ratio of about 1:6 to every enemy casualty, excluding the uncounted enemy wounded. The relative weapons losses in these operations were also instructive. Although the RF and PF lost about 1,600 weapons, they salvaged about 1,800 of the enemy's. But the most revealing and alarming discovery concerned the comparative losses during enemy attacks on territorial outposts. In the same three-month period, RF and PF casualties, including missing, were nearly 1,300, whereas enemy losses were only 245, a ratio of 5:1. Weapons losses in defensive engagements were even worse: 1,000 lost against 100 recovered. The obvious conclusion was that mobile operations by territorials were immensely more profitable than the defense of fixed outposts. But the JGS team also found that only 2,192 out of 22,884 offensive operations involving units of company size and larger resulted in combat with the enemy, a poor record attributed to weaknesses in intelligence, operational planning, and techniques. Although this judgment was partially valid, benefits were derived even from mobile operations that netted no enemy. The confidence of the population in their local forces was strengthened, and the enemy was often compelled to move or discontinue its activities.

There were 3,400 outposts, watch towers, and bases to be defended in MR 4. These included large FSBs with artillery and remote mud forts garrisoned by weak, understrength PF platoons. The futility of defending the vast delta from isolated posts scattered about the rice fields, canals, and swamps had been recognized by General Nghi and the JGS, but despite the strong desire to reduce the number of posts, to do so would remove all government presence from many contested villages and hamlets, surrendering the population to the communists. However, in 1973, MR 4 withdrew forces from 97 outposts and 193 others were lost to enemy attacks.

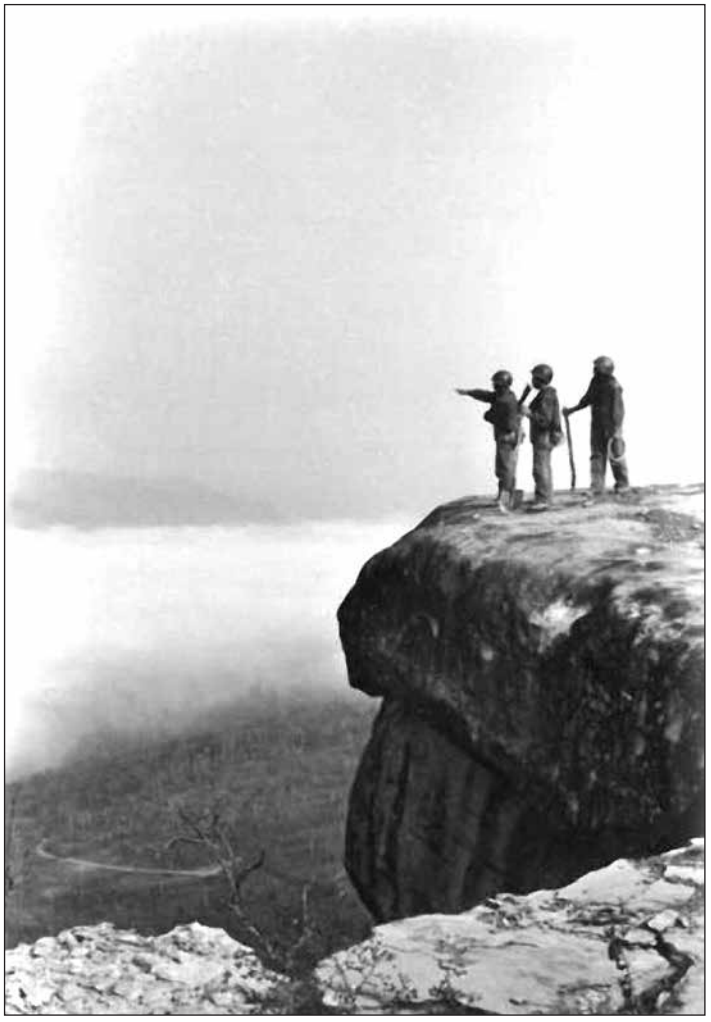
As the first anniversary of the ceasefire approached, no early decision was foreseeable in the Mekong Delta. Although harassed by increasingly threatening ARVN offensives, the North Vietnamese still maintained control over major infiltration corridors into the delta and had gathered enough rice to sustain its forces, although some troops were on short rations. Despite severe personnel losses and a few minor military defeats, the PAVN had not succeeded in occupying any significant towns but was slowly bleeding the local South Vietnamese forces.

CHAPTER 7
THE COMMUNIST LOGISTICAL BUILD-UP

True to his reputation, General Giap had, as always, taken great care over logistical preparations for the coming campaign. The resumption of fighting was due in great part to protect and expand the North Vietnamese logistics organization. The main task assigned to it was to open a new logistic corridor on the eastern side of the Truong Son (Annamite) Mountain chain running along a great part of the border with Laos and Cambodia, on the South Vietnamese side, paralleling the networks of routes known as the Ho Chi Minh Trail, on its other side.

The engineer units consequently continued during the period 1973–74 to expand the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The 470th and 472nd Engineer Divisions continued to push south their road-opening operations, west of the Truong Son Mountain range, bringing it to a 1,240km-long north–south axis leading into depots in Cambodia and Cochin China. The 471st and 473rd Engineer Divisions had the daunting task of operating a new route on the eastern side of the cordillera. They were to cut through jungle and mountainous terrain a path stretching from Khe Gio, North Vietnam, to Bu Gia Map, eastern Cochin China. Immune from US air attacks, apart from occasional VNAF harassments, the units pushed relentlessly by using more than 1,000 tractors and other specialized vehicles and thousands of trucks. By January 1975 some 5,560km of new roads had been built, bringing the total length of roads used for supply and troop movement along the Annamite Mountain chain to 16,790km, of which 6,810km were main roads, 4,980km were connector roads, and 5,000km were bypasses and detours. That represented an increase of more than 50 percent of built roads from the previous eight years. The average travel time along the Ho Chi Minh Trail was cut short, from more than three months in 1967 to six days in 1975. The different fronts and battlefields' engineering units also contributed to the building and repair of campaign-level routes, bringing the total length of these routes to 6,000km to ensure the movement of forces and supplies from the strategic lines of communications into each combat theater. The engineers also brought the fuel pipelines further south. In 1975 the fuel supply services could use some 1,712km of pipelines; 1,311km had just been laid during the two previous years. Some 101 pumping stations had been installed to run the pipelines system. Overcoming many technical, terrain, and weather difficulties, the POL troops brought the gasoline pipelines over mountain peaks more than 1,000m high and across rugged terrain, rivers, and streams, building flat terraces for installing pumps on the steep mountainsides. On 15 January 1975 gasoline flowed through the pipeline all the way to Bu Gia Map for the first time.

The organization responsible for the movement of all personnel and material into South Vietnam was the general Directorate for Rear Services under the command of Colonel General Dinh Duc Thien, which received a top priority in terms of budget. The headquarters directly controlled the operations of all support units in North Vietnam, northern Laos, and of Logistical Group 559 under the



By early 1973 the North Vietnamese decided to open a new logistics corridor on the eastern side of the Truong Son (Annamite) Mountain chain running along a great part of the border with Laos and Cambodia, on the South Vietnamese side, paralleling the Ho Chi Minh Trail, on its other side. This PAVN engineer team is charting where to open the new routes. (PAVN)

Practically immune from air attacks, apart from occasional VNAF strikes, the North Vietnamese made tremendous efforts to open the Ho Chi Minh East Trail, on the South Vietnamese border side along the Annamite cordillera. A Soviet T-100 bulldozer of the 473rd Engineer Division is seen working on a portion of it. (PAVN)

A group of artists of the PAVN propaganda department perform for these engineer troops during a rest on their relentless push southward of building routes along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The Japanese-built Hino big trucks seen behind had been purchased and offered to North Vietnam by Cuba. (PAVN)

The Ho Chi Minh Trail was a sophisticated system of roads run by Logistic Army 559, with five subordinated division-sized logistical groups and motor transportation divisions. Controllers handled the truck traffic and diverted them as needs dictated. (PAVN)

The logistical routes were segmented by waystations with garages and dispersed and camouflaged shelters for the trucks. Each segment was a distance of a maximum one-day drive. (PAVN)

Before the expansion of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, most North Vietnamese troops had to march to the southern battlefields, a journey that took between three and six months through the mountainous jungle. By early 1975 an entire PAVN army corps could be redeployed into the south in two weeks. These troops arrive at their bivouac zone to spend the night after being transported by vehicles. (PAVN)

command of Colonel General Dong Si Nguyen who commanded the sophisticated system of roads and trails known as the Ho Chi Minh Trail. In July 1973, Logistical Group 559 was brought into an army status, also known as Military Region 559. Army 559 had both administrative and operational tasks. Administratively, it controlled logistics operations in southern Laos, Cambodia, and South Vietnam. Operationally, it controlled five subordinated division-sized logistical groups. Group 470 had jurisdiction generally in the tri-border area of Laos, Cambodia, and South Vietnam; Group 471 controlled activities north of Group 470 and into the A Shau Valley in Thua Thien Province; Group 473's area was north of A Shau Valley and ended just south of Khe Sanh; Group 472 operated in southern Laos; and Group 571

At the bivouac zone, the troops could even enjoy some rest. The young women are volunteers from the paramilitary Assault Youth organization. Thousands of them worked on the Ho Chi Minh Trail as laborers or porters. Today in Vietnam, the survivors suffer from health problems due to being exposed to tropical diseases in malaria-infested jungle as well as chemical herbicide. They also suffered a kind of social segregation for not being married when young. (PAVN)

Dozens of pontoon bridges were laid along the various logistical trails that directed southward the flow of men and equipment. Crossing this river are several trucks fully loaded with supplies, including a Soviet ZIL-150, leading, followed by a Polish Star-66 and several Soviet ZIL-157s. (PAVN)

These Chinese-built CA-30 trucks cross a bypass, avoiding a damaged makeshift bridge. More than two and a half times the amount of goods were transported through the Ho Chi Minh Trail in a two-year period after the ceasefire than during the 13 preceding years. (PAVN)

covered the southern part of North Vietnam.

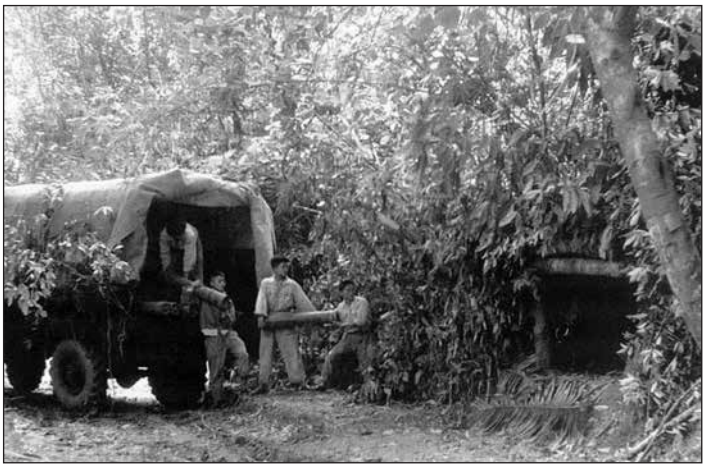
With the logistical build-up, Army 559 considerably expanded its forces. The 470th, 472nd, and 473rd groups were reorganized as engineer-logistical divisions. In July 1973, 571st Group was transformed into a motor transportation division, with 2,600 vehicles

These engineer troops manhandle tubes of different diameters used for the fuel pipelines network that had been considerably expanded. The fuel now flowed directly from North Vietnam to practically all the battlefields in the south. (PAVN)

Young women of the Assault Youth organization lay and fix fuel pipelines. The system cut through the jungle and climbed over high peaks, necessitating many pumping waystations. (PAVN)

and 8,500 troops. 471st Group was later reorganized along the same lines. In January 1975, Army 559 had a total of 6,770 trucks for its own transportation task.

These North Vietnamese troops manhandle crates of ammunition just delivered by trucks. Some 70,000 tons of ammunition had been stockpiled in the south before the final offensive. (PAVN)



The ammunition on this PAVN Soviet GAZ-66 truck was being unloaded. The munitions were stored in storage pits dispersed on vast camouflaged surfaced to reduce their vulnerability to air attacks. (PAVN)

The North Vietnamese also expanded their storage facilities. The 541st Warehouse Regiment and the warehouse units along the Army 559 strategic corridor reorganized their forces and networks of depots. Many warehouses in excess of 10,000 tons were built in the areas of Cam Lo, A Loui, Kham Duc, Lang Hoi, Bu Prang, La Ba Khe, and Bu Gia Map. Base areas 609 and 702 were major fixed storage installations in the Central Highlands, atop the Laotian border and were second in importance after those situated around the Dong Ha and Khe Sang areas just south of the DMZ. In the zones controlled by Army 559, some 43 vehicle maintenance shops were set up as well as 253 mobile maintenance teams. There were also two armor and two artillery maintenance shops. The North Vietnamese also repaired as many as 14 captured airfields throughout South Vietnam to accept transport aircraft. The former US base of Khe Sanh was rebuilt and its runway extended to accept jet fighter operations if required. The North Vietnamese Navy also used its freighters to deliver goods at Cua Viet harbor, just south of the DMZ, then channeled the deliveries by barges to Dong Ha.

The network of troop waystations (Binh Tram) was also reorganized into 29 transportation regiments, including four newly formed regiments. These transportation regiments used a standard transport leg of six to eight days for one trip. At each end of the transport leg were supply and technical facilities, large storage warehouses, and specialized loading/unloading personnel with the ability to rapidly handle large truck convoys. The POL stations were spread along

It was in the communist occupied part of the ARVN MR 1 area that the North Vietnamese logistical build-up was the most spectacular. As these zones were contiguous to North Vietnam, they were de facto being annexed by Hanoi which developed there their greatest logistic installations. These Chinese built CA-10 trucks had just crossed the DMZ, bringing in supplies. (PAVN)

The South Vietnamese did not want to challenge the communist controlled areas contiguous to North Vietnam, fearing that an offensive there would trigger a massive response from Hanoi. Furthermore, the ARVN did not have enough strength to push through there. Consequently, the PAVN continued, unopposed, its logistical build-up. These motor launches towed in full daylight barges of supplies on the Thach Han River. (PAVN)

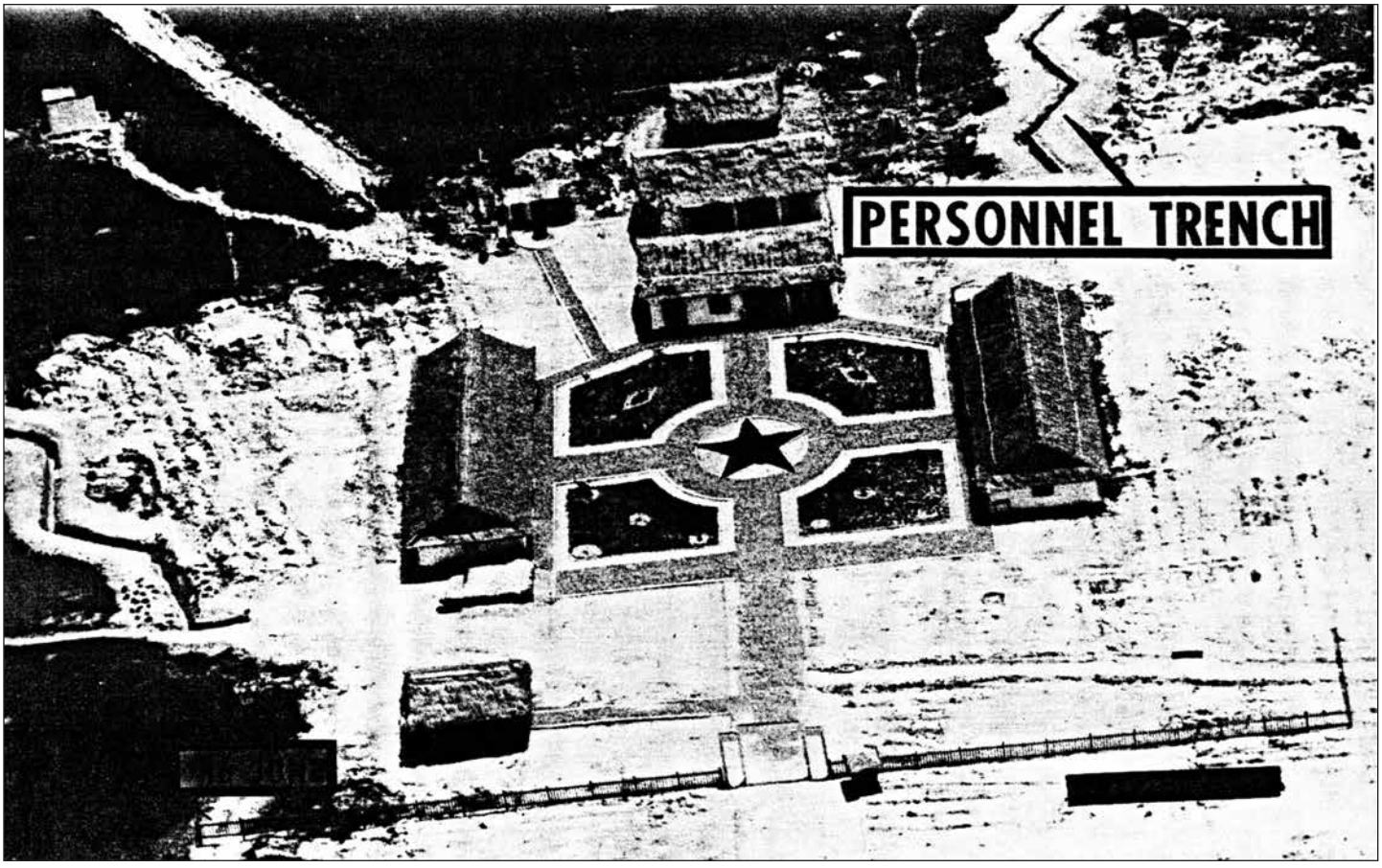
the entire route. During the 1973–74 and 1974–75 dry seasons, the volume of transport traffic during a 24-hour period averaged about 600 trucks.

Army 559 also directly controlled up to four independent engineer regiments. Also placed under its jurisdiction were the 968th Infantry Division and several independent infantry and anti-aircraft regiments deployed to protect the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The signal branch also concentrated its operations on three communication networks along the logistics corridors: radio, telephone, and the military postal system. Of special importance was the network of telephone cables called 'unification' that ran from Hanoi all the way down to the B2–COSVN headquarters and its supporting radio network.

The small city of Dong Ha, approximately 10km south of the DMZ, was transformed by the North Vietnamese as a logistical hub where supplies arriving across the border were funnelled into the different storage areas of the area. They even used transport boats and landing crafts to discharged supplies arriving along the Thach Han River. (PAVN)

The North Vietnamese erected buildings to store their equipment and vehicles around Dong Ha without much camouflaging them. These PT-76 tanks were just coming out a storage hangar. (PAVN)

been sent to the south, and 80,000 more were added in the first half



The North Vietnamese presence around Dong Ha was made ominous, so confident that they became portentous due to a lack of reaction from the ARVN. That was clearly illustrated by this aerial reconnaissance photo of a local equipment storage area in mid-1974. (USAF)

From January 1974 to March 1975, Army 559 had transferred 823,146 tons of supplies to the south, including 70,000 tons of ammunition and 107,000 tons of fuel. That represented an increase of 1.6 more tonnage delivered than the previous 13 years. Out of this total, 364,542 tons were delivered to the different fronts, 2.6 times the total of the previous 13 years. For the first time, the PAVN could be resupplied fully and in time without depending on pre-positioned stockpiles and coolie-borne material. The communists also continued to send reinforcements. In 1973 some 100,000 extra troops had of 1974. The number of armors grew from about 115 vehicles at the ceasefire to more than 700 in January 1975, and heavy artillery pieces also increased during the same period from about 170 to 520. More than 3,000 permanent buildings and storage areas had been built to accommodate this heavy equipment.

Comparing the relative strength of each adversary, 219,000 communist troops in South Vietnam opposed to some 1.1 million South Vietnamese troops tell little about relative combat power in 1973. However, a closer look at the combat force structures gives a

The North Vietnamese deployed heavy anti-aircraft assets in the Dong Ha – Khe Sanh sector, protecting there their massive logistical build-up. That included the SAM-2s of the 367th SAM Regiment. (PAVN)

clearer understanding, with more than half of the South Vietnamese forces being territorial troops used only for the pacification campaign. The ARVN forces were overextended throughout the country in a defensive posture, with countless economic and population centers to defend. Its artillery and armored assets were spread thin, with no central reserve left. Attempts to raise a second marine division or a ranger division failed due to lack of resources. At the completion of that 'logistic offensive', the North Vietnamese had completely altered the balance of force. The new network of routes allowed them to dispatch their important strategic reserve – seven motorized divisions and two armored brigades – which could be deployed within two weeks to support any required front. Never during the long conflict had the South Vietnamese faced such a threat. Their strategy mindset was defensive in nature, abandoning the initiative to the enemy. On the other side, the communist forces were devoted almost exclusively to offensive operations against fixed South Vietnamese bases, towns, and lines of communication. All their backup administrative and logistical forces were safely in North Vietnam, Laos, or Cambodia. The PAVN could then concentrate its divisions, artillery, and tanks to obtain local superiority to attack.

At the first anniversary of the ceasefire, no significant changes to the military situation had taken place; the South Vietnamese had preserved most of their positions. Despite suffering several local setbacks, the ARVN could still respond forcefully to any North Vietnamese attack, defeating several enemy division-sized forces. However, the PAVN's continual harassment tactics slowly bled their enemy, which was unable to contain its logistical build-up. In fact, contrary to the US promises, less than six months after the Paris Peace Accords, Washington had already reduced its military aid to South Vietnam. That was not a deliberate policy but the result of internal infighting between Congress and the Republican administration of President Nixon. The first announced cut was for $500 million in military aid because of the perceived reduced combat level due to "the effects of the ceasefire," and that the aid ceiling would be reduced from $2.1 billion to $1.2 billion. The VNAF was the first service to suffer from the cut, seeing many of its lost aircraft not replaced on the one-for-one replacement scheme allowed by the Paris Peace Accords. Consequently, President Thieu ordered the service to conserve its precious assets. Another blow fell in December 1973 when the US Army unexpectedly cut off all operational and maintenance funding for the rest of the fiscal year 1974, which ran from July 1973 to June 1974. That alarmed Major General John E. Murray who headed the DAO. He was further frustrated by the fact that the Pentagon could not ascertain exactly what kind of equipment and supplies would be reduced. US depots had recently been sucked dry by massive resupply efforts to Israel during the October 1973 Yom Kippur War. General Murray wanted to warn the South Vietnamese of the impending cuts but Ambassador Graham Martin denied him, fearing that could demoralize the South Vietnamese further.

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